

Women's Struggle in Occupied Palestine

Women's liberation is a matter of increasing importance in our time, for we live in the era of the victory of socialism, the era of the steady advance of national democratic liberation movements and the building of communist societies. Women's liberation is directly linked to this struggle; we cannot struggle for the people's liberation unless priority is given to women's liberation. On the other hand, women cannot achieve liberation through a simple campaign for change in old ideas and customs. It is not enough to demand freedom in choosing a husband, jobs and clothes, or to work in this or that association, committee or syndicate. The women's struggle must have a political, national and progressive orientation aimed at changing the economic conditions which subjugate both men and women.

Women in general suffer class oppression as well as oppression by the men. In addition, the Palestinian woman suffers national oppression due to the imperialist-supported Zionist invasion and occupation of Palestine, which inflicted grave political, economic, social and cultural destruction on Palestinian society. From the beginning, Palestinian women realized that this national and class oppression fell equally on Palestinian men. Thus, Palestinian women worked side-by-side with men against the common enemy, postponing the conflicts that might arise between them for the sake of the main aim: liberating Palestine and establishing a democratic society as a major step towards women's full liberation.

The Palestinian people have firmly faced many challenges and conspiracies aimed at eliminating their identity and just rights. The Zionist invaders, upon occupying major parts of Palestine in 1948, worked in accordance with a planned policy to take possession of the land by expelling the original inhabitants and enacting Judaization. A major component of this policy was destroying the Palestinian economic infrastructure by imposing restrictions on agriculture, industry, marketing and education. Moreover, laws were made to prevent the founding of national associations and syndicates, and to disband the existing ones. The same policy was later applied in the remaining parts of Palestine which were occupied in 1967.

Confronting these challenges and conspiracies requires the recruitment and mobilization of all the potentials of the Palestinian people, of whom women compose roughly the half. The Palestinian woman's contribution has been significant; she spared no effort to serve her people, country and cause. This was based on her strong belief in the people's ability to face these challenges, despite Zionism's massive aggression and imperialist support. The Palestinian woman's struggle has progressed from being partial and instinctive, to being overall and organized. Women's participation has taken a variety of forms, including armed struggle.

The Palestinian woman's struggle, as part of her people's struggle, has passed through three main stages corresponding to the following periods: (1) The beginning of the Zionist invasion of Palestine until the formation of the Zionist entity in 1948, (2) 1948 until June 1967, (3) the contemporary Palestinian national liberation revolution.

Stage one: Prior to the formation of the Zionist entity

In 1884, Palestinian women were among the peasants who acted to uproot the first agricultural settlement which the Zionists tried to build near Affouleh. This was an early indication of women's social and national-political awareness. After World War I and the results represented by the Sykes-Picot agreement and then the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, the Palestinian woman's awareness increased. In 1920, women actively participated in demonstrations and strikes protesting the colonial plans against the Palestinian Arab people and demanding cancellation of the Balfour Declaration. In 1921, women made a qualitative advance by establishing the first women's union, headed by vanguard women like Melia Sakakin and Zalikha Shehabi. This union played a major role in organizing women's efforts and in demonstrations demanding a halt to Zionist colonization in Palestine. During the 1929 revolt, Palestinian women participated in the demonstrations where many were martyred, such as Jamile Azaar, Aisha Abu Hasan and Azba Salame.

In 1928, the Arab Women's Association was founded as a Palestinian association to work side by side with the men in the common struggle. The founders were Khadije Hussein, Tarab Abdul Hadi, Zakia Budeiri, Wadiha Khalidi, who chaired the association. In October 1929, a women's conference was held in Jerusalem. Hundreds of women participated and condemned the repressive British measures. The conference sent cables to the King of Britain and the United Nations. A delegation of fourteen women was formed and met the British High Commissioner, requesting cancellation of the Balfour Declaration, a halt to Zionist immigration to Palestine, the discharge of the Zionist British Deputy, the release of prisoners, and a halt to torture and aggression against the Palestinian people.

In 1936, the women's struggle took new forms in the context of the famous general strike, which lasted six months. Women started collecting and distributing material and financial aid to the rebels and to the families of martyrs and prisoners; they sewed clothes, bought and transported weapons, carried food and water to the rebels fighting in the mountains and administered first aid. On June 25, 1936, Fatima Gazal became the first Palestinian woman to be martyred in combat; ►

she was killed in a battle with British soldiers at Wadi Azzoun.

In 1942, women's solidarity associations were formed with branches in the main cities. In 1947, upon the UN's adoption of the partition plan, she was alongside the Palestinian man building barricades and fortifications, digging trenches, transporting weapons and forming more associations, like the one called Daisy Flower in Jaffa, which provided medical care, food and water to those fighting to defend the land. Members of this association included Yusra Toukan, Fatima Abdul Huda, Juhenia Khorshid and Arabia Khorshid. Women also joined the fighters in their attacks. Many were martyred, including Juliet Zakka, Jamile Ahmad, Deba Atyeh and Helwe Zaidan. The latter had taken the gun of her husband after he and their son were martyred; she continued shooting at the Zionist gangs until her martyrdom on April 9, 1948. On April 10, 1948, Hayat Balbisi, who taught school in Deir Yassin, upon hearing of the massacre there, left her parents' house in Jerusalem and hurried to the village. There she was martyred while helping the people and protecting school children from the Zionists' savage artillery.

Stage two: May 1948 - June 1967

Women's struggle, like the entire Palestinian national movement, suffered a recession after 1948. The reasons are obvious: the partition of Palestine, with the Zionists occupying the major portion, the West Bank annexed to Jordan, and the Gaza Strip placed under Egyptian administration. The reasons for the recession can also be traced to the nature of the leading Palestinian national bourgeoisie, whose interests were now directly linked to either the Jordanian or Egyptian regime.

A new characteristic of this stage was that women began to join political movements, but this was minimal and limited to women with higher education. In general, women's activities in this period were charitable and social endeavors, with some superficial political work. Still, gains were made in the 1948 occupied territories, and more women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip responded to educational opportunities.

Upon the occupation, the constrictions imposed on women in the traditional society were compounded by the restrictions imposed on all Palestinians in the Zionist state, which perpetuated the British Emergency Defense Regulations to control the population under occupation. The Zionists aimed to make the Palestinian Arabs ignorant; social activities, clubs and national associations were prohibited, while avenues to continuing education were blocked. Roughly the same policy, in different forms, was applied by the Jordanian regime in the West Bank.

In the 1948 occupied land, Palestinian women encountered difficult economic conditions. They could not be employed in the productive sector and were generally barred from higher education. Thus, women tended towards agriculture and marginal jobs. Their social and political activities were limited to those of a few who were able to work through the

Communist Party, Rakah. In the early sixties, more women managed to continue their education. At the same time, the founding of Al Ard (The Land) movement afforded an independent Palestinian political framework. Women immediately joined this movement, and some like Najaa al Asmar rose to leading positions.

In the Gaza Strip, the women's role was minimal due to the economic and social backwardness prevailing there. Yet they participated in demonstrations: in 1954, protesting against the project to resettle Palestinians in the Sinai desert; in February 1955, protesting the Israeli attack on the Gaza railway station; on March 7, 1957, after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, which had been occupied during the 1956 tripartite aggression on Egypt. Women also participated in the continuous one-week demonstration which helped to foil the plan to internationalize the Gaza Strip.

In this period, women also participated in the big demonstrations in the West Bank against the imperialist-reactionary plan to form the Baghdad pact. This demonstration was prohibited and brutally attacked by the Jordanian regime, resulting in the martyrdom of many, including Raja Abu Amashe. Many others were arrested in similar demonstrations, such as Widad Qumri, Suad Hureish, Nahil Oweida.

In the Gaza Strip, women displayed greater interest in educational opportunities, this being allowed by the Egyptian regime. Thus, their employment opportunities began gradually improving with the possibility of becoming a teacher, doctor, engineer or social assistant. This gave women new and broader prospects for joining the national struggle alongside the men.

In 1964, the General Union of Palestinian Women was founded, after the establishment of the PLO. This allowed a greater number of women to participate. Through the Union, many women attended the Palestinian National Council held in Jerusalem at that time. The union held its first congress in Jerusalem in 1965, and branches were set up in many cities and villages of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Later in 1966, upon the Jordanian regime's decision to close all PLO associations, the union was closed. Yet it continued to function secretly through associations and operating sewing centers, as well as first aid and nursing courses, and political and cultural sessions.

Stage three: The 1967 occupation and the rise of the Palestinian Resistance

After occupying the remaining parts of Palestine, the Zionists started once more enacting their plans to empty the land of its inhabitants; more Palestinian families were displaced, mainly to neighboring Arab countries. Under military rule, political, social and ideological activities were prohibited for Palestinians, while their land was confiscated. There were laws aiming to make the population ignorant, interference in education and prevention of employment opportunities, to

push Palestinians to emigrate. Students were arrested prior to exams, teachers expelled and universities closed. There were efforts to rob and distort the Palestinian national heritage. Later, on the political level, the so-called civil administration was imposed, while the national associations and municipalities were repeatedly attacked.

Nevertheless, Palestinian women played a greater role in the national struggle in this period. This was basically a continuation of their previous role, yet with broader activities and greater commitment. It was now clear that the national cause was a question of the very existence of the Palestinian people as a whole. Furthermore, the rise of the Palestinian resistance organizations gave new inspiration and opportunities for struggle. In this period, Palestinian women's struggle within the revolution was characterized by the following:

a) Women participating in all fields: political, ideological, military, economic, social, educational, cultural.

b) Broader participation by an increasing number of women in activities everywhere, whereas such participation had previously been limited to vanguards. This was especially marked in the 1948 occupied territories, where the struggle there was now linked to the overall Palestinian struggle.

c) Leadership passed to politically educated and working women of the lower strata of the petit bourgeoisie.

d) A rise in women's motivation to struggle.

e) Broader participation of women in rural areas, which are most endangered and in sharpest confrontation with the Zionist plans to confiscate the land, expell the population and build settlements.

f) Attention given to women's liberation by the leftist organizations, and more support to their general and personal social matters.

Military activity

Women were active militarily as compared to the foregoing periods and the traditional role of the Arab woman. Yet this was still limited to a number of vanguards. In addition to storage and transport of weapons, women now started to carry out operations. In October 1967, Fatima Bernawi was arrested after planting a bomb in a cinema in Tel Aviv. On November 21,

Women campaign against illiteracy



1968, Shadia Abu Ghazale was martyred while preparing a time bomb; she was the first woman martyr at this stage. In February 1969, a number of women (Rasmieh Odeh, Aisha Odeh, Mariam Shakshir, Latifa Hawari, Rashide Obeid) were arrested, accused of planning and executing two of the greatest military operations at that time: the explosion at the Supersol supermarket and the attempted explosion at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Women such as Leila Khaled, Amine Dahbour and Therese Halasa participated in special operations. Other women were arrested while transporting weapons, like Abia Taha. Women played a great role in the experience of the early seventies in the Gaza Strip, when the freedom fighters controlled the Strip by night. Women also took part in attacks on Israeli patrols, throwing molotov cocktails and stones, which is considered a new form of resistance by many observers. In July 1968, many women were arrested in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, accused of aiding the resistance fighters. Others were expelled: Isam Abdul Hadi, Abia Taha, Huda Abdul Hadi and Nawal Titi. During 1968, the number of women in Nablus prison reached sixty, forming 20% of the inmates. Women prisoners were subjected to monstrous physical and psychological torture.

Political activities

Realizing that a conscious, organized, leading role cannot be maintained unless guided by revolutionary organization, women began to join the organizations of the Palestinian Resistance, as well as forming women's unions, syndicates, clubs, associations and social committees.

Women became more active in demonstrations. The most outstanding was that of April 1968, in Jerusalem, where women dressed in black protested against the planned Israeli military exposition. Women have been active in the mass uprisings and strikes, in distributing political publications and slogan-writing on the walls. Women were active in the first Land Day demonstration in the Galilee in 1976, when Khadije Shawahne was martyred. Other women have been martyred in demonstrations of solidarity with political prisoners, and protesting the Sabra-Shatila massacre: Lina Nabulsi, Muntaha Hourani, Taghrid Batmeh, Ihsan Abu Draz, Maysoun Kastanawi, Aziza Hussein, Elham Shahbari. Many others were wounded. In a month of mass uprisings from March 12th to April 12th, 1982, sixty women were wounded, while the number of women imprisoned rose to 150.

Economic activities

The number of working women has increased during the last ten years and reached 17% of working-age women. Women carry out a major part of the agricultural work. Increasing interest in higher education can be noted, giving women more employment opportunities. The percentage of women doctors, engineers, teachers and other professionals has

increased, allowing women to demand equality in wages and benefits. This also advanced women's participation in syndicates, and the founding of new associations and committees, such as the Women's Work Committee, the Working Women's Committee and the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees.

Social activities

Palestinian women have managed to change some of the old traditions, such as the wearing of veils and adornment, and choosing a husband. Women were active in starting youth centers, clubs, summer camps, kindergartens, nurseries, literacy campaigns, political and cultural debates, and nursing and first aid courses. Women have given great attention to the families of martyrs and prisoners, and formed various committees to this purpose. A noticeable social phenomenon is marriages between Palestinians of the 1948 occupied territories and those of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Another such phenomenon is refusal to marry outside the occupied territories, especially if this would impose emigration. Women have also defined social relations on a correct basis, promoting discussion of important political and economic questions, rather than gossip and talk about the latest fashions. Through all of this, women have managed to gradually change the old view of women as being only fit for housework.

Cultural activities

Women have played a great role in raising cultural awareness among the Palestinian people and protecting the national heritage. Many committees were formed to preserve traditional handicrafts, and magazines are published, such as *The Heritage and Society Magazine*. Women have engaged in literary activities, writing stories and poems, and working in the press. Women have contributed to art through paintings and sculpture. They participate in folkdancing and song groups, and have been active in the initiation of theater groups. Women have also devoted attention to organizing libraries and engaged in literary, historical and social research.

Conclusions and tasks

Through this preliminary survey of the struggle of Palestinian women, we can conclude the following:

1. The struggle of Palestinian women is directly linked to the overall situation of the Palestinian people's cause and revolution. It is affected by the crises, wars and conspiracies from which our people suffer, and especially by the Zionist occupation, which has left its mark on every aspect of Palestinian society.

2. The number of working women, their participation in syndicates, and their initiation of associations and committees, is on the increase.

3. There is responsiveness to academic and professional education.

4. The leadership has passed from national bourgeoisie to politically educated and working women from the lower strata of the petit bourgeoisie. Related to this, the nature of women's activities has changed from being charity-oriented to more comprehensive struggle.

5. Despite relative development, the man's view of the role of women is still superficial. Men still try to confine women to housework, which limits her freedom and paralyzes her abilities.

6. Despite the attention of some leftist organizations to support the women's struggle, this is below the required level. The organizations' intentions are not reinforced by programs based on comprehensive study of women's problems and the means for resolving them. This retards the advance of the women's movement and the emergence of women with leadership experience, capable of holding key positions in the associations in the occupied territories.

7. Women's participation in the military field has been limited to a number of vanguards.

8. Energies are scattered among a great number of women's frameworks.

The Palestinian revolution in general, and women in particular, have urgent tasks in order to promote the advance of the women's struggle in the occupied territories:

1. Ideological struggle against old customs and beliefs regarding women and their role and against the laws of the reactionary Arab regimes and the Zionist occupation which perpetuate a backward attitude towards women (those governing inheritance, wages, polygamy, divorce, etc.). The revolutionary organizations must adopt women's issues through proper study of their situation and struggle experience, in order to develop this experience and spread awareness of their real role in the society.

2. Programs must be drawn up, based on thorough study among women, to provide proper solutions for daily problems through child care and employment opportunities, especially in productive fields, and for the training of women cadres.

3. Unifying efforts must be made to avoid political divisions within mass organizations. Also, quality must be given priority over quantity when establishing committees and service facilities, such as kindergartens.

4. Developing existing projects and starting more productive cooperative projects, as this would reduce unemployment and in turn emigration, while recruiting more women into the labor force.

5. Linking the women's question to the national question on the basis of a progressive orientation; pressuring the national progressive forces to devote greater attention to women's issues.

6. Concentrating efforts to increase women's participation in the struggle against the Zionist enemy, especially the armed struggle. ●