Original Paper

Palestinian Women's Organisations: Their Challenging Journey towards Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

Palestinian Women's organisations have a very important role in the Palestine civil society. The development of these organization is well recognized and they reached their peak at the beginning of the INTIFADA.

Until the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), women's organisations formed part of the national struggle against the Israeli occupation, and their agenda was subordinate to that of the national movement. In the late 1980s, however, a process of transformation was initiated that provided women's organisations with the opportunity to focus on women's issues. Indeed, since the creation of the PA, women's organisations have focused almost exclusively on women's issues. The PA, in contrast, has attempted to marginalize women, as reflected in the process of its consolidation. As a result, women's organisations have attempted to influence PA policy with the objective of improving the position of women in Palestinian society.

This paper examines the means and strategies that the Palestinian Women's Organisations have adopted to influence Palestinian Authority (PA) policy.

Keywords

Women, Organisations, Palestine Authority, Civil society, development

1. Introduction

Palestinian Women's organisations have a very significant role in the Palestine Civil society. The development of these organisations is very distinctive and they reached their peak at the beginning of the INTIFADA. Women's organisations have constituted an important component of Palestine civil society. While at the beginning of this century, women's activism was limited to a small circle of

women, it expanded substantially during the 1970s and 1980s through the inclusion of groups who had previously been excluded from political activism. Participation of women reached its peak at the beginning of the INTIFADA (uprising), but contracted again at the end of it. Similar to other civil society institutions, the development of women's organisations has been shaped by the context of the Israeli occupation.

Until the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), women's organisations formed part of the national struggle against the Israeli occupation, and their agenda was subsidiary to that of the national movement. In the late 1980s, however, a process of transformation was initiated that provided women's organisations with the opportunity to focus on women's issues. Indeed, since the creation of the PA, women's organisations have focused almost exclusively on women's issues. The PA, in contrast, has attempted to marginalize women, as reflected in the process of its consolidation. As a result, women's organisations have attempted to influence PA policy with the objective of improving the position of women in Palestinian society.

Brunner 2005, 37 discussed on the Palestinian women's suffrage from triple oppression through Islamic attempts to discipline women, through the Israelic occupation and through patriarchial structures of society.

Another study conducted by Al-Botmeh (2013) inspects the determinants of labor force participation for women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGS) with PCBS data. The findings authenticate the significance of education as a determinant of participation.

A study of Palestinian business woman was focused on procedure aimed to improving their own entrepreneurial skills and those of others (Mas, 2011)

A recent study examined women's barriers to toil market participation and entrepreneurship in Palestine territories. Many business women owners like all entrepreneurs in Palestine experienced that there is a complete lack of proper business training (Al-Botmeh, 2013)

This study will highlight the difficulties that Palestinian Women's Organisations faced and the strategies that they have adopted to influence Palestinian Authority (PA) policy.

2. Development of Women's Organisations

2.1 The Origins of Women's Organisations in the Occupied Territories

Charitable Organisations established by the upper and middle class women in the beginning of the twentieth century marked the first manifestation of Women's activism. The most active one among the Women's activism was the Palestinian Women's Union, which provided "both the nucleus and a framework for later women's initiatives in Palestine" (Sharoni, 1995). As in the case of all charitable organisations, its activities were restricted to urban areas and focused on the organisation of demonstrations against the Balfour Declaration and on protesting the invasion of Jewish immigrants to Palestine (Jad, 2011).

The expansion of female organisation at a national level was marked as an important step in the consolidation of charitable organisations, culminating in the establishment of the Palestine Arab Women's Congress on 26 October, 1929 (Kawar, 1996; Sayigh, 2000; Sabbagh, 1998).

The creation of Israel in 1948 and the mass exodus of Palestinians led to the weakening of the male-dominated national movement. Subsequently, women's organisations focused almost exclusively on charitable work and social services, such as health care, care for the elderly and maintaining nursery schools and orphanages (Fleischman, 1995; Gluck, 1995; Sayigh, 2000). In addition to the existing charitable organisation, a number of organisations were established between 1948 and 1967 to deal with the refugees. The majority of these organisations were created by urban and middle class women, who were mostly from notable families (Fleischmann, 1995). The most prominent charitable organisations that were established during this period are: Dar al-Tifle al-Arabi, the Red Crescent Society, the Society of the wounded Militant, the Orphan's Home, the Family Welfare Society, Girls' Orphanage Home, Al-Maqassed Society and Inaash al-Usra. The latter, which was established in 1965, developed into the largest charitable organisation under its founder Samiha Khalil who remained an active member in the political scene, serving on the Palestinian National Council up until her death in 1999 (Sayigh, 2000).

Although women had played an instrumental role in the creation of charitable organisations and their operation, their involvement in charitable organisations declined. The decline in women's participation is largely due to their transfer to the more politically oriented women's committees that were created in the late 1970s.

A turning point in the development of women's activism was the creation of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1994, which not only provided a new channel for women's participation, especially outside the occupied Territories, but more importantly tied women's activism in the Occupied Territories, to the national struggle. It was for this purpose that the PLO created the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW).

2.2 The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW)- the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) institution for Women

The GUPW became the main PLO institution through which women's participation was channelled and that was the only vehicle for women's participation in the PLO's Executive Committee (Kawar, 1996).

As the PLO was declared illegal by Israel, the GUPW operated mostly underground in the Occupied Territories, where it provided the framework for a majority of charitable organisations (Sayigh, 2000).

Like other mass organisations of the PLO (Note 1), the GUPW was characterized by the division along factional lines, limited cooperation among various women's organisations, whose "related more to leaders of their own factions than to each other" (Kawar, 1996; Gluck, 1995). The GUPW depended on PLO funding, and received through the Palestinian National Fund (PNF). As the disbursement of funds proceeded in line with factional strength, Fatah, the largest political faction in the PLO, received the

bulk of the allocated funds. As a result, it has been able to maintain the largest network of programmes (Kawar, 1996; Peetet, 2010).

Dependence on PLO funds consolidated the influence of political factions on the women's organisations. The objective of political factions to mobilize as many women as possible was reflected in the programmes of women's organisations, which were designed to mobilize women as a social group, rather than to empower them by addressing the social and economic conditions that sustain the disadvantaged status of women (Holt, 1996; Tsikata, 2014). Even the leftist political factions, such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), although acknowledging the relevance of "women's issues" failed to challenge the existing social order (Holt, 1996).

The failure to address such issues influenced the relation of the GUPW with women's organisations. Women were approached by the GUPW as programme beneficiaries rather than as decision-makers or directors of projects and programmes, such as early childhood development or vocational training (Sayigh, 2000). Even after the adoption of the strategy of *sumud* by the PLO in 1973, (Note 2) which enabled a number of charitable organisations headed by women to expand their programmes, both their agenda and their view on the role of women in Palestinian society continued to be in line with dominant view expressed by the national movement in general and the GUPW in particular. According to this view the role of women was regarded as subordinate to that of the national struggle (Tamari, 1996). This is most explicitly expressed by Sameha Khalil, who was the head of the largest charitable organisation In'ash al Usra, as well as a prominent figure in Palestinian politics. Explaining the objectives of her organisation in educating girls and the future role she envisioned for them, she argued, "When a girl begins to earn money she may begin to impose conditions on her family. We do not encourage such a spirit in our girls. To open the door too wide would cause a bad reaction". (Note 3)

As in the case of other organisations that received *sumud* funds, women's charitable organisations focused on urban areas, thus neglecting the needs of the majority of Palestinians who live in rural areas. When their efforts did not succeed in improving Palestinian living conditions, a new response to the occupation emerged, the *sumud muqawimm* - active resistance. It departed from the assumption of *sumud*, which attributed underdevelopment in Occupied Territories to the Israeli occupation. Instead it sought to address issues of underdevelopment by transforming Palestinian society itself, at the proletarian level. To this end, a network of local committees was created to deal with such issues as health, labour and agriculture. The emergence of the women's committees formed as a part of this development.

3. The Emergence of Women's Committees

Several structural changes provided the context for emergence of women's committees. Since the onset of the Israeli occupation in 1967, profound changes led to socio-economic and political transformation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that in turn had an impact to the role of women in Palestinian society.

A major transformation at the economic level resulted in the significant reduction of agricultural land. This was caused by the decline of agriculture in importance, but more importantly by the continued confiscation of Palestinian land by the Israeli authorities in order to expand land available for Jewish settlers. This development forced Palestinian farmers to work as cheap wage labour in Israel. Meanwhile women, who constituted the vast majority of agricultural labour, stayed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, working typically in the textile industry, manufacturing products subcontracted to them by Israeli factories (Haj, 1992; Dajani, 1994).

A more essential factor that transformed the traditional role of women was caused by deportations and imprisonment of men by the Israeli authorities. The initiative for the first women's committees, the Women's Work Committees (WWC) in March 1978, came from rural areas and had strong ties with a left-leaning faction. Although it was not officially affiliated with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, its establishers maintained strong ties with it (Hiltermann, 1991; Jad, 2011).

Similar to other committees and as a result of the political factions' attempt to increase their constituency, the WWC split along factional lines in the early 1980s. The original committees became now formally affiliated with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and were renamed the Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (Jad, 2011). It soon developed into the largest committee with 34 local committees and 1948 members, mostly working women (Debus, 1986). Over the next few years, a number of other committees, with various political affiliations, were established.

The Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (affiliated with the PFLP) focused on educated women from urban middle classes and students; the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees (affiliated with the Palestine Communist Party) focused on working women, and the Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (affiliated with the DFLP) in addition to housewives, on working women (Hiltermann, 1998; Sayigh, 2000; Kawar, 1996). It also makes every effort to spread cultural awareness of and provide training on the need to oppose violence against women. They have published and distributed a host of pamphlets, publications and reports on the subject and organized campaigns in favour of women's rights and against violence. It also provides women victims of violence with psychological support, legal and social guidance and rehabilitation, in addition to placing a media spotlight on the issue and its impact on Palestinian society (Tsikata & Darkwah 2014).

The Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (affiliated to the DFL), for example, involved mothers of rural and refugee background in the education of their children in the FPWAC's kindergartens (Najjar, 1992). It was only the Fateh-affiliated WCSW that was ideologically close to the charitable organisations. Similar to charitable organisations, it provided services to women rather than involving them in the operation of their programme (Holt, 1996; Jad, 2011).

Women's committees got expanded and within two years after their formulation they established branches in all parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, especially in rural areas. The number of participating women did not exceed three percent of the local female population in the initial years after their establishment. It was mainly because of the initial reluctance of women to be involved in a

55

political programme. Later, as a result of the creation of popular committees, the number of women organised in the women's committees increased substantially that gave immense strength and power to the women indeed. Moreover, the committees assumed a crucial role in sustaining the INTIFADA, in that they provided the foundation for the mobilization of women (Strum, 1998)

The Development of Women's Committees

3.1 Women's Committees and the INTIFADA

Various authors point to the crucial role women's committees played during the INTIFADA as "the main engines behind the activism of women in popular committees and other frameworks" (Hiltermann,1991, p.197; Augustin, 1993, p. 30; Holt,1996, p. 27). More specifically, the substantial increase in the number of women involved is closely linked to the role of women's committees as a model for creation of popular committees in the neighbourhoods, villages, and refugee camps (Augustin, 1993; Gluck,1995; Holt, 1996).

The popular committees were created in order to meet the needs of population affected by the INTIFADA. Five major popular committees existed, each dealing with Agriculture, Food storage and distribution, Medical services, and Guarding of neighbourhoods against the Israeli occupation (Sharoni,1995). When schools were closed by the Israeli army in 1988, the popular committees provided education to children in homes, churches and mosques (Hiltermann, 1998; Robinson, 1997). The number of women in the popular committees reached more than fifty percent of their members, as previously marginalised groups of women from rural areas and refugee camps participated in the INTIFADA (Hiltermann, 1998; Strum, 1998, Tamari, 1996).

In addition to popular committees, women were also instrumental in the establishment of population cooperatives, which mainly operated at the household level. Besides food processing, some cooperatives also manufactured clothing. Home-produced goods were sold through the women's committees (Abdo, 1991). While cooperatives played a key role in overcoming food shortages resulting from any curfew and the boycott of Israeli products, their success in improving the situation of women is mixed, due to the lack of a clearly defined strategy to achieve the proclaimed goals (Hiltermann, 1998; Abdo, 1991; Najjar, 1992).

While prior to the INTIFADA, women's committees succeeded in recruiting only a limited number of women; their numbers have increased considerably since then. This increase is a direct result of the creation of the popular committees and the involvement of a high number of women, which is noteworthy.

Women's committees also underwent structural changes in the phase. In order to ensure a high level of responsiveness towards the immediate needs resulting from the INTIFADA, the committees, with the exception of the women's committees affiliated with Fateh, underwent de-centralisation, allowing a high level of independent decision-making at the local level (Augustin, 1993). Decentralisation was further enhanced through the isolation of the West Bank from Gaza Strip during the INTIFADA. As a

consequence, women in the Gaza Strip took decision independently from the West Bank branch (Jad, 1995).

The close links established with popular committees, impacted a shift in the agenda of the women's committees. More specifically, their activities focused on teaching and rendering services to the affected population (Jad, 1995; Hiltermann, 1998). Women thus retreated to the role they had traditionally occupied. While this shift from a political programme to one that focused on service delivery contributed to the increase in membership, women's participation was viewed in this case as socially acceptable. The same also led to the weakening of the committees. In addition, several further developments formed an impediment to their implementation of a feminist agenda. Of particular importance is the creation of the **Unified Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU)**. Through the UNLU, in which representatives from Fateh, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and at a later stage from the Palestinian Communist Party, the INTIFADA became institutionalized and lost its spontaneous character (Robinson, 1997).

This development had direct implications for women's committees. While in the early months of the INTIFADA, committees opened their membership to women outside the political factions, the creation of the UNLU represented the re-institution of factional divisions, undermining the non-factional character of the early months of the INTIFADA. Thus, "the cadres became more ornaments for different political groups and political considerations became more important than feminist concerns" (Kamal, 1998, p. 88).

Besides, as the major function of the UNLU was to give the INTIFADA a direction, it gave little attention to women's concerns. This was exacerbated by the composition of the UNLU, which was predominantly male (Hiltermann, 1998). Communiqués, issued by the UNLU and implemented by the popular committees reflected the altered view of women (Sharoni, 1995). When addressing the role of women during the INTIFADA, the UNLU referred to women as "mothers of martyrs", while the participants of the INTIFADA were usually referred to "sons" and "brothers" (Communiqués no. 29, quoted in Massad, 1995; see also Hiltermann, 1998). Massad adds that the UNLU Communiqués listed women as a separate category from the occupational groups, such as merchants, peasants, students and workers, implying that the occupational category did not include women (Massad, 1995). Thus, the "re-traditionalisation" of women's committees as reflected in their agenda was reinforced by the leadership of the INTIFADA.

A further development that reflected the weakening of women's committees was the outlawing of the popular committees by the Israeli Ministry of Defence on 18 August 1988. (Note 4) The outlawing of the popular committees led to a substantial decrease in the number of participating women. This decline in turn affected the women's committees, as many women in the popular committees were also members in the women's committees (Jad, 1995).

Without a mass base, women's committees experienced increased interference by the political factions in their programmes to the extent "that the political organisation, through orders coming from above,

57

was dictating to a great extent the women's committees' programmes and the details of their work" (Jad, 1995, p. 239).

The weakening of the women's committees as a result of the above-mentioned factors was further exacerbated by the emergence of religious parties that have traditional view of women.

In spite of the above, the INTIFADA gave women opportunities of participation in a public space usually reserved for men and made them more visible outside the domestic sphere (Giacaman & Johnson, 1994). Although the substantial participation of women could not be translated into concern gains, the INTIFADA did contribute to the introduction of a gender agenda for women and introduced a change in consciousness (Dajani, 1994; Holt, 1996; Augustin, 1993).

3.2 Factional Control and Attempts of Unification

The affiliation of women's committees to political factions had implications for their development. Several authors point out that the weakness of the women's committees lies in their division along factional lines (Kawar, 1996; Tamari,1996). Political factions exerted a high leverage over women's committees by shaping the agenda of the latter and also through funding. Funding was used by the political factions as a mean of influence. As in the case of other committees, women's committees received their funds through their affiliated factions.

Despite the high leverage that political factions maintained over the development of women's organisations, the latter attempted in several instances to unify their efforts in one body. The creation of the Higher Council for Women (HCW) in December 1988 represents such an effort. The HCW was created upon the call of UNLU to coordinate activities during the INTIFADA, but also following the demand of international donors to create a single body to coordinate funding (Augustin, 1993). For women's committees, however, the HCW offered an opportunity to increase their independence from political factions. This is reflected in the HCW's membership, which included, in addition to representatives from the women's committees, for the first time, women independent of any political faction.

This attempt to increase independence was undermined by several factors relating to the issue of leadership within the HCW and the women's organisations, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the HCW. Soon after the creation of the HCW, factional divisions emerged after the Fateh-affiliated WCSW's claim to represent the "female executive of the diaspora national leadership" (Augustin, 1993, p. 36; see also Abdo, 1994; Holt, 1996, pp. 32-33). In this claim, it was backed by the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), which operated in Tunis. The GUPW's opposition was based on its objection to the inclusion in the HCW independent women activists, whom it suspected of a conspiracy to undermine its perceived role in representing all women's organisations

Parallel to the GUPW's resistance, the creation of the HCW also faced opposition from charitable organisations in the Occupied Territories. As a response to the formation of the HCW, the charitable organisations established the Union of Voluntary Women's Associations, comprising 56 charitable organisations of six regions in 1989. (Note 5) One of its first activities was to organise in Bethlehem in

58

December, 1990 a conference entitled "Women and the Uprising", timed deliberately to coincide with the conference "The INTIFADA and some women's social issues". The latter constituted primarily a forum for women's committees. In its conference the Union underlined its conviction of the primacy of the national struggle and thus represented the view that prevailed among the political factions. As a result of the GUPW's opposition and the conflict between charitable organisations and the women's committees, the HCW ultimately failed (Augustin, 1993).

While the political factions had maintained a high leverage on the development of women's committees, the decline of their financial resources contributed to their increasing inability to do so. As women's committees had been relying to a large extent on funding from the political factions, a decline of such funds compelled women's committees to seek other sources. This initiated a process of transformation of the committees. As a result of this transformation a new movement of women's centers emerged that has, especially after the creation of the PA, assumed a prominent role in promoting women's agenda. This process of transformation is examined in the following section.

3.3 From Committees to NGO's

As examined above, the development of women's committees has been shaped by the position of political factions. While the factions' focus on mobilizing as many women as possible led to an increase in women's participation in the committees, this also prevented the emergence of feminist agenda, which was subordinated to the national struggle (Kawa,1998). As a result, women's attempts of unification were thwarted, and their role confined to the delivery of social services (Tadros, 2014).

However, the decline of funds and the resulting weakening of political factions reduced the influence of the latter on women's committees, giving activists from the women's committees the opportunity to shift from an imposed predominantly national agenda to one concerned with women's issues. To this end a number of women activists established new institutions, women's centers, which researched and addressed the conditions of women in the Occupied Territories. These new centres were non-factional and constituted the core of a new movement that flourished in the 1990s and in particular after the establishment of the PA. The availability of international funding aided this development.

Attempts to gain increased independence from factional influence became visible in the 1980s when women's committees created projects outside the framework of the committees. These projects became fully independent following the weakening of the factions. The Women's Studies Center is a case in point. Its predecessor, the Women's Research and Resource centre, was established in the late 1980s by the FPWAS, to study issues related to property rights, labour law and private status law and their implications for women (Jad, 1995). In the 1990s it became independent. Under its new name, the Women's Studies Center, it has been conducting research and training women in research skills (Gluck, 1995). Its aim has been to contribute to the development of a Palestinian feminist agenda, to research women's overall situation, and to develop strategies which address women's concerns at the popular level.

On the other hand, the decline of funds provided by factions to women's committees compelled the latter to seek new sources of funding. This was especially true for women's committees that were affiliated with the leftist faction; Fateh the largest among PLO factions, continued to receive funds, through the allocated funds also diminished (Kawar, 1996). Other committees had to terminate many of their projects as a result of declining funds (Jad, 1995).

The new funds were typically provided by European donors. In contrast to the funds provided by political factions for the purpose of mobilizing women, European donors attached other conditions to potential beneficiaries. The criteria for eligibility included in particular the representation of various factions. This condition reduced the importance of factional adherence as a characteristic of the committees.

A case in point is the Union of Palestinian Women's Work Committees (UPWWC) which was transformed into the Palestinian Working Women Society. In this process of transformation, the UPWWC replaced volunteers with full-time staff and changed its agenda from the mobilization of women, to their consciousness raising and the improvement of their skills. Its programme consists to a large extent of workshops and training sessions for women. After the establishment of PA, the UPWWC focused on influencing PA policy towards women.

In addition to the centres that emerged from the women's committees, independent activists, not previously affiliated with any political faction, established women's centres that deals with issues pertaining to the social, economic and political situation of women. Three noteworthy examples are the Women's Affairs Centre, the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), and the Jerusalem Centre for Women.

The Women's Affairs Centre (previously called Women's Resource Centre) was established a few months after beginning of the INTIFADA by the Palestinian novelist, Sahar Khalifeh. Its goal has been to examine the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of women under the Israeli occupation. In particular, it sought to document the participation of women during the INTIFADA. Based on its findings it has aimed at developing a new vision for the role of women in Palestinian society (Gluck, 1995). The objective of the WCLAC created in 1991, was to improve the social and in particular the legal situation of women.

The new centers have all focused on gender related issues that have included researching the impact of the social, economic, and political conditions on women, on political and legal education, and on lobbying. In addition, they provided a forum for issues such a democratic development, women's rights and women leadership. In brief, all the above mentioned centres were created to examine the factors that have shaped the conditions of women, and to develop strategies that aim at improving the situation of women (Jad, 1995; Holt, 1996).

Despite these advances, in the political arena, the marginalization of women begun during the INTIFADA, continued after the establishment of the PA, in which appointments are based on clan and

tribal affiliation as well as allegiance to the ruling party, Fateh. Leading positions were filled by men while women were largely excluded from this process (Abdo, 1999).

Since the early 1990s, women activists initiated attempts to counter their marginalization. Rather than acting alone, they created a network through which they aimed at forging a common position towards the PA. The most important network is the Women's Affairs Technical Committees (WATC). In addition to this network a number of women's organisations established ties among themselves as well as with other civil society organisations. The WATC and other initiatives of horizontal networking are discussed in the following section.

4. The Organisations of Women

4.1 Horizontal Networking - the Creation of a New Institution

The first network, the WATC, emerged in August 1992 during the Madrid peace negotiations. Its formation aimed at countering the marginalization of Palestinian women during the negotiations and their exclusion from the Palestinian institutions that were created to manage and distribute international aid to Palestinians. During the negotiations, over 30 technical committees were created to serve as an advisory body for the Palestinian delegation. While the committees included over three hundred men, only four women were invited to participate (Connell, 1995; Gluck, 1995). The marginalization of women was similarly evidenced in the creation of Palestinian institutions that were to manage and distribute international aid to Palestinian. A case in point is the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), whose 14-member board did not include any women (Hijab, 1994; Holt, 1996; Jad, 1995). Fearing that the lack of female representation in the technical committees and the institutions would increase the marginalisation of women, sixteen women activists created the WATC. Its initial aim was to increase the number of women in the technical committees and to influence their policies by including a gender-perspective (Gluck, 1995). After the creation of the PA the WATC shifted its focus to raising public awareness of women's issues and lobbying for legal equality for women.

Following the creation of the PA, the WATC has been the only institutionalised network that has been active in lobbying for change of PA policy, and for a reform of the existing legislation that discriminates against women.

Nevertheless, several features of the WATC have contributed to its weakness. These related to aspects of its organisation, to the nature of its agenda and to its strategy of implementing its objectives. While the WATC succeeded in broadening its coalition of women's organisations, it failed to include an important segment of women's organisations, the charitable organisations, and so did not succeed in evolving into a comprehensive network representing the interests of all women. As a result of this failure, the WATC failed to assume a leadership role among women's organisations.

Similarly, its campaigns of raising women's consciousness for their rights, remain, as long as the structures that sustain their subordination continue to exist, a futile effort.

61

Limiting its actions to lobbying for legal change, the WATC failed to address issues, which are concern for the majority of women. To improve the social, economic and political conditions that shape women's lives would require the transformation of the existing patriarchal order. In order to create a counter-hegemonic force to this order, the WATC would have to build a coalition of a variety of civil society institutions whose aim is to transform patriarchal structures towards a more equitable order. Having failed to do so, the WATC has contributed considerably to its own weakening.

Without a broad basis of supporting institutions, the WATC could not effect any change of PA policy. Following the PA's refusal to comply with its demands, the WATC diverted its efforts to lobbying the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) for policy change. The PLC, however, as a result of its politically marginalized role, has been ineffective as a legislative body.

Thus, while the ATC has remained the only institutionalised network of women's organisations, its organisational properties, its agenda and strategy have accounted for its weakness.

4.2 Horizontal Ties among Women's Organisations and other Civil Society Institutions

In addition to the institutionalised network, represented by the WATC, women's organisations also forged ties with other women's groups that offered an alternative terrain for cooperation and action. While the WATC represents an institutionalised form of cooperation, the additional ties remain loose and largely ad-hoc. Similar to the activities of the WATC, cooperation among women's organisations as well as with other civil society organisations focus on awareness campaigns and training in legal literacy. The Women's Studies Center and the Women's Center for Legal Aid, as well as human rights organisations, have been prominent.

This effort is illustrated in the "Palestinian Model Parliament - Women and Legislation". Initiated in 1995 by the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling, it involved fifteen women's organisations and constituted a mock parliament on the status of women and the personal status law (Abdo, 1999). In another instance, cooperation among women's organisations involved the issue of "honour killing", i.e., killing in which a male family member kills a female relative based on an alleged assault on family honour. "Honour killings" continue to occur and represent the prevalence of customary laws over existing written ones.

Women's organisations also forged links with other civil society institutions, in particular with human rights groups and those that are working towards attaining a democratic order, such as A*l -Haq*, and the Palestinian NGO network, PNGO . As in the case of cooperation among women's organisations, these ties have been ad hoc and linked to particular projects. Such cooperation was involved in the initiative of the Palestinian Working Women Society (PWWAS) to examine the Labour Law and its implication for women. Cooperation between women's organisations and other civil society institutions also included campaigns to raise awareness on issues such as early marriage, the protection of battered women and free education for women younger than 18 years. Another case of cooperation that involved human rights organisations is the effort of the Jerusalem Centre for Women to increase coordination on the issue of and lobby for women's rights in Jerusalem. To this end the Centre created a steering

committee with included, in addition to the WATC, the human rights organisations, the Independent Commission for Residents' Rights, the Alternative Information Center, the Palestinian Human Rights Information Centre, and non-Violence Studies Center.

In addition to the ad hoc forms of cooperation, women's organisations have been members in PNGO. Women's organisations that are members of PNGO have been active in lobbying for a change in the PA's proposed "Associational Law concerning Charitable Societies, Social Bodies and Private Institutions".

In all those cases, cooperation among women's organisations and between them and other civil society institutions is ad hoc. This ad hoc nature of cooperation among the above groups suggests the lack of a comprehensive strategy and vision to improve the situation of women. This is the result of the failure of women's organisations to create a forum that would unite women's organisations and other civil society institutions operating in fields relevant to women around a common vision and strategy to improve the situation of women. A change of the existing political and social order requires a more comprehensive agenda and the creation of a platform of civil society institutions that are in favour of comprehensive change. WATC has been unable to establish a leadership role among women's organisations sufficient to bring about such change.

4.3 The PA's Response

As mentioned above, the EATC has effected some changes in legislation. In the absence of a Basic Law, these constitute, however, only regulations. Given the inability of the WATC to forge a broad coalition of society institutions supporting their agenda and the reluctance of the PA to depart from its patriarchal structure, the PA rejected demands for the creation of a PA institution that deals solely with women's issues. Instead, the PA responded by creating several ministerial departments that deal with women's issues, but that are imbedded in the structure of the respective ministry and thus subject to its scrutiny and control. Women's departments, which aim at developing gender-sensitive policies, exist in five ministries: Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC), Agriculture, Health, Social Affairs, and Youth and Sports, of which the Directorate of Gender Planning and Development (DGPD) at the MOPIC is the most active.

In addition to the ministerial departments, the PA also allowed the establishment of an "inter-ministerial Women's Coordinating Committee". This committee was created in March 1996 following the Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) by participating women activists. It comprises eleven ministries and is based on a governmental action plan, the "post Beijing World Strategies and Action Plans for the Palestinian government until the year 2000". The action plan developed strategies to integrate women into the political structure of the PA and to promote participation in the fields of social and economic development. It serves as a foundation for the formulation of policies of the respective women's departments. In September 1996 the committee formulated the "National Strategy for the Advancement of Palestinian Women".

The significance of the plan is its assigning to the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) a central role in the development affecting women's organisations. Thus the plan states as one of its "strategic objectives" to develop the role of the GUPW in its "capacity as representative of Palestinian women in Palestine and abroad, to form a frame for all NGOs and to extend it and establish branches in every district of the country to reach to women in towns, villages, refugee and Bedouin camps" The leading role assumed by the GUPW signifies its move to consolidate, with the support of the PA, its position in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As the GUPW has also shown reluctance to challenge the existing political and social orders, its prominent role expressed in the National Strategy implies the potential consolidation of a traditional view on gender relations in the Palestinian context. However, to what extent these strategic plans become part of the general ministerial plans or the PA strategy remains to be seen" (Kawar, 1998, p. 242)

5. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the situation of women has advanced little for sure because of the characteristics of adopting strategic plans and policies of Palestinian Authority (PA) to promote Women's participation in the fields of social, political and economic development in spite of a number of structural impediments, including general conservatism in society. Nevertheless, to what extent these strategic plans become part of the general ministerial plans or the PA strategy remains to be explored. This paper, in general, assessing the situation of women under the PA in two main areas - Representation in "State" institutions and Law is conclusively noteworthy. Also, the in-depth analysis of the instrumental role played by Women's Organisations in the given period, despite their struggles and failures faced in various measures is creditable.

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Notes

Note 1. The PLO's mass organisations included labour and professional unions, as well as teachers' and writers' organisation.

Note 2. The nation of sumud was adopted by the PLO to reduce the impact of the Israeli occupation through material assistance and the delivery of social services.

Note 3. Quoted in Haj, 1992, p. 776

Note 4. Membership in the popular committees became punishable by up to 10 years of prison.

Note 5. Namely Jerusalem, Nablus, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Hebron, and Gaza. The Union is a number of the