Women and Philanthropy in Palestinian and Egyptian Societies: The Contributions of Islamic Thought and the Strategy of National Survival

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Arab societies provide a variety of models for the study of women and philanthropy. Although it has been customary to emphasize the role of religion in shaping women’s roles in the Arab Middle East, the most instructive lessons are to be found in secular societies. Islam dominates the culture and social expectations of most people of the Middle East, but Islam was not always the unchallenged philosophy of life. Moreover, the impact of Islam varies greatly from one country to another due to the succession of contrasting political ideologies such as liberalism, authoritarianism, socialism, and Islamic fundamentalism. Often, Islam took a back seat to more popular ideologies, such as Arab nationalism. Indeed, the present-day ascendency of Islam as the political ideology of mass appeal camouflages recent periods of secular nationalism. Thus, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the primordial influence of Islam was often modified by powerful currents emanating from the quest for a strategy of national survival.

Islamic influences, however, shaped the lives of women more than any other sector in society. Even when challenged by secular currents, the radius of Islamic influence invariably encompassed family and gender relations. There are historical reasons for this observation, such as colonialism, which banished the Shari’a, or canon law, from every area of life except family relations. Fatimah Mernissi, Moroccan feminist and scholar, has concluded that this aspect of the colonial legacy resulted from the cynical neglect of Western colonial powers, which did not hesitate to reform the Islamic penal and commercial laws but stopped short of confronting personal status law. The Islamic patriarchy was, therefore,
strengthened by the transforming colonial experience. But in the case of the Palestinians, the patriarchal family institution succumbed to later pressures due to the threat of national annihilation posed by such forces as Zionist settlement in Palestine and the sectarian onslaught against Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The family unit, as the last surviving indigenous institution in Palestinian society, became the target of secular nationalist attention. The transformed family institution was finally able to transcend the inertia imposed upon it by colonial strategies of selective modernization and change.

The Palestinian experience, thus, presents the clearest case of gender mobilization by nationalist and revolutionary forces. This was a case of gender activation in the interest of national survival, a cause which religious forces were incapable of contesting. Egypt’s case, on the other hand, illustrates the Islamic capacity for gender mobilization in the interest of a total transformation of society. Ever since the 1930s, Egypt’s Islamic forces entered the political arena in order to establish an Islamic state. Islamic attitudes toward gender, economic equity, the family institution, the guardianship and socialization of children, and the state’s responsibility for the preservation of the national culture underwent extensive redefinition. Since the greatest Islamic critique of the secular state centered around the absence of economic equality, Islamic mobilization often entailed addressing the community’s economic needs. The modern Islamic movement in Egypt, both in the 1930s and the 1970s, sought to alleviate the economic deprivation of males and females as a demonstration of the Islamic commitment to egalitarian principles. Whether or not this mobilization led to the empowerment of women is questionable. Similarly, whether the secular and national gender activation of Palestinian women will ultimately lead to autonomy and empowerment is still debatable.

**ISLAM’S TOLERANCE OF WOMEN’S PUBLIC ROLES**

Muslim female activists have long concluded that even though reforming the Shari’a may be difficult, a liberal interpretation of the Islamic religious code is possible. Muslims were always able to choose between four schools of Islamic jurisprudence which differed in their interpretation of the Qur’an and hadith (statements by the Prophet Muhammad). Moreover, efforts of Muslim male reformers in the past succeeded in disestablishing the restrictive and conservative Hanafi school of law in favor of the more expansive and tolerant Maliki school. This effort, which began in Egypt around the turn of the century, was led by the famed Muslim reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh and was later emulated by the
personal status laws of other Arab countries. These reforms, which improved women's material compensation in the case of divorce, were the beginning of a long effort stretching to the era of President Anwar Sadat.  

This tendency to maneuver within the four Islamic schools of jurisprudence and to rely on interpretive, rather than confrontational strategies, is fully appreciated by Palestinian women today. According to a Palestinian female lawyer, Muslim women often maximize their rights by publicizing specific portions of the religious texts which accord women clear and undeniable rights. Among these, the most important are women's right to own their own businesses, conduct business transactions, and own property in their own name. The extension of specific economic rights to women was a natural consequence of the Qur'anic recognition of women as legal entities and as full members of the new spiritual community of Islam. Not only were women given the right to inherit, though half of the share of a brother, but they were the first among adherents of other religions to enjoy the right of disposal of their own wealth even after marriage.  

Muhammad's allusion to women as "the sisters of men" was not empty rhetoric. Women's other rights, such as the freedom to choose a husband and to specify certain conditions in the marriage contract as protection against the threat of polygyny or summary divorce were later written in the laws. The inspiration for these rights came from the Qur'an, which stipulated, among other things, that the principle of compatibility should always govern marital unions. The dowry should be paid to the woman, not her father, according to Islamic scholars. But in practice, local cultural customs, particularly where Bedouin customs survived, eroded and restricted women's Islamic rights.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the Islamic view of women is the religion's outlook on a woman's right to work and to education. The Islamic view of these crucial but contested rights, however, has often been influenced by the twin necessities of economic need and national survival. For example, Muhammad al-Ghazzali, one of Egypt's most prominent Islamic voices, was the strongest advocate of women's education and their right to leave their homes. In his view, women's education is not only necessitated by their role as the educators of children and the mainstay of the family, but also as the ideological emissaries to other women in the battle for Islamic ascendency.

The right to work was not an unqualified right in the Islamic view, but was constrained by the concept of fitrah, or woman's special nature. Since Islam implied that men and women are not equal but are destined for complementary roles, not all occupations are considered suitable for women. Only genteel occupations which minimized opportunities for
mixing of the two sexes are permissible, such as teaching, medicine, nursing, social service, and writing and publishing. Women are also encouraged to work in family-related endeavors, as joint partners with husbands, or in support of children of an absent or deceased father.

Islamic advocates also object to female employment as an assertion of feminine autonomy and independence. The right to work is considered subject to approval by a woman’s husband or father. Muslims often assert men’s guardianship over women, which they do not consider as an elevated status but a serious male obligation to the family. The concept of male guardianship, however, does not extend to a woman’s property rights, seeking an education, or the free choice of a marital partner. But as a corollary to a woman’s unequal right of inheritance, she is not obligated to extend financial support to the family. Islam’s definition of acceptable public roles for women, therefore, can be restrictive if allowed to go unchallenged. But given the Islamic emphasis on women’s economic rights and the desire for educating females, rights could be expanded and roles redefined when powerful historical forces intervene.

Thus, while Islam does not recognize class divisions or gender considerations, it does accord women a certain degree of dignity and respect. The Islamic institution of the waqf (charitable religious trusts), for instance, deems it necessary to alleviate poverty when it afflicts families, not individual females. With Islam’s strong preference for marriage over celibacy under any conditions, women are expected always to be sheltered by the powerful institution of the family. But when the male headship of the family is weakened or eliminated by political and military forces, women naturally assume the headship role and qualify for religious charitable assistance. This has been the case of Palestinian women who lost their males in large numbers as a result of war, exile, or Israeli and Arab repressive policies. Social welfare institutions in the West Bank and Gaza, a sizeable phenomenon during the period of Israeli occupation, often solicited zakat (religious tithing) for their female-directed projects. No one objected to this type of religiously sanctioned charity, even when it was dispensed to females directly.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN

The scholarly but controversial leader of the Islamic regime of the Sudan, Hassan al-Turabi, has condemned the segregation of women as truly un-Islamic. In his view, Islam intended such domestic sequestration of women only as a punishment for adultery. No virtuous woman can be confined to her home as a requirement of the religion, and the Palestinian experience validates that. Men, particularly nationalist leaders and
members of the political elite, were the greatest driving force behind the public activism of Palestinian women. The early Executive Committee of the Arab Women’s Union in 1929, was dominated by female descendants of some of Palestine’s most prominent families. This activism, which accompanied the beginnings of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine following the First World War, nevertheless confined the female leadership to a specific role. With the exception of some memorable all-female demonstrations protesting the Balfour Declaration and its impact on Palestinian national rights, women’s early activities were channeled into social welfare projects. Although males provided psychological support, the women provided all the ingenuity, hard labor, and funding activities. The oldest of these women’s organizations, the Arab Women’s Union of Jerusalem, founded in 1929, began by serving orphaned children and providing literacy and sewing classes for women. Another sports and cultural club for girls founded in 1945 in Nablus was later turned into a center for female literacy classes. In 1952, a girl’s orphanage serving daughters of those killed in the 1948 War was opened.

The tempo of women’s charitable work accelerated after the loss of the Palestinian homeland to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt in 1948. Charitable societies serving a new generation of war orphans developed in most Palestinian towns such as Tulkarm (1961), al-Bireh (1955), Hebron (1956), and Kalandia refugee camp (1958). Two of these institutions achieved a great deal of renown because of their prominent ministering to women and children. These were Dar al-Tifl al-Arabi (Home of the Arab Child), founded in Jerusalem in 1949 specifically to shelter the orphans of the massacred village of Deir Yassin, and In’ash al-Ursrah (Society for the Sustenance of the Family), which devoted itself to economic projects benefiting rural women. The older Arab Women’s Union of Nablus, which predated the 1948 War, undertook one of the most ambitious of the women’s projects, namely the founding of a women and children’s hospital, Al-Itihad al-Nisa’i Hospital, offering its services free of charge. The hospital opened its doors in 1948 and today maintains a staff of a hundred and fifty. A community-based clinic was later founded by the Birzeit Women’s Charitable Society.

During the British Mandate period (1921–48) and the Jordanian period (1948–67), women’s organizations and social projects were financed entirely by the activities of members. With the exception of the very few, such as Dar al-Tifl, which managed to tap into private German funding and government and private funding from the Arab oil states, most of these charitable societies relied on community resources. Another restrictive aspect of their operations was the Jordanian Law on Charitable Societies, first promulgated in 1956. The law established strict supervi-
sory procedures which threatened these societies with dissolution if, for instance, executive officers failed to show up at meetings. Other grounds for dismissal included refusal by the societies to permit governmental search of records and sites. Applications for registration were not easy to obtain, and the law permitting appeal before the Jordanian High Court of Justice was finally repealed in 1966.\textsuperscript{20} Jordanian hostility toward this national activity was only matched by the later obstructionist policies of the Israeli occupation regime. National need for public health services, educational facilities for orphaned children, and literacy classes for women, however, were critical. The Jordanian regime favored the East Bank (the former Transjordan) with investments and services, and the Israelis later punished Palestinian national resistance with a policy of studied neglect and repression. No area was as badly in need of improvement as natal and maternal care. Women in the West Bank and Gaza gave birth seven times on the average during their lifetime, but public health facilities lagged behind. Most delivered their babies at home with the assistance of ill-trained midwives. Only the health clinics of some refugee camps, operated by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) aided pregnant mothers who technically qualified as refugees.\textsuperscript{21} The urgency of the health situation was mostly addressed by women’s social organizations, providing yet another example of women’s self-reliance and autonomous activity.

THE PLO AND THE GENERAL UNION OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN

Women’s social activism, in time, produced not only an intensification of national sentiment but also feminist consciousness. Women’s organizations proved to be a springboard to the official ranks of the first Palestinian national organization emerging in the 1960s. According to Issam ‘Abd al-Hadi, the founder of the General Union of Palestinian Women, an invitation was extended to twelve active women by the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 to serve as delegates to the first Palestinian national assembly meeting in East Jerusalem. ‘Abd al-Hadi asserts that the women were selected for their national, rather than feminist, credentials. The PLO then encouraged the women to call for a national meeting in order to create a representative organization as an official cadre of the PLO. This group turned out to be the General Union of Palestinian Women, which is officially attached to the PLO as the second oldest cadre following the General Union of Palestinian Students. Around 139 delegates from all over the West Bank elected an administrative council, which in turn chose a nine-member executive committee. The women delegates, however, retained their positions within the char-
itable institutions, fearing a Jordanian crackdown against the GUPW. The repression against this PLO institution became real when the Israeli army occupied union President 'Abd al-Hadi's hometown, Nablus. The Israeli authorities were quick to sense the nationalist and mobilizational potential of the political and charitable women’s institutions. 'Abd al-Hadi was eventually imprisoned and later expelled from the West Bank by the Israelis.22

The headquarters of the GUPW moved from Jerusalem to wherever the PLO relocated. As the original PLO, led by Ahmad Shukairy, declined and the latter Arafat-led PLO emerged in 1969, the GUPW moved to Amman, Jordan, then to Beirut. As an official arm of the PLO, the women’s union flourished economically but lost much of its autonomy. The union was allowed a free hand in recruiting camp women to employment created by the PLO in the Red Crescent Society and SAMED, the organization’s major economic cooperative. It was said that the PLO encouraged refugee women in Lebanon to seek employment in order to free the energies of males for fighting duties. The GUPW leadership, on the other hand, was encouraged to become more and more involved in the political institutions of the PLO. The PLO nominated the members of the female leadership to the Palestinian parliament in exile, the Palestine National Council. Some women were even named to the Central Committee of the PLO, and Fateh loyalists in the camps who supported Arafat’s faction within the PLO were accorded membership in the military and administrative councils of the camps.23

One woman made her way to the inner circle of the PLO leadership by virtue of her membership in the Fateh guerilla organization. This was Intissar al-Wazir (also known as Um Jihad), whose husband, Khalil al-Wazir, was Arafat’s second in command. Considered a co-founder of Fateh, Um Jihad headed the guerilla organization in 1966 while the male leadership suffered imprisonment in Syria. She was made the director of Palestinian veterans’ affairs and welfare department in Lebanon. Political activists like Um Jihad found their way to prominence through involvement in the national sphere of social work.24 Later examination of the contribution of the male leadership to the mobilization of women was also particularly critical of the loss of fiscal control within the GUPW upon the standardization of fiscal procedures in Lebanon. Once they lost the power of the purse, the women were forbidden to raise their own funds and were held to a stricter system of accounting by the newly established Palestine National Fund. Until the latter years of the PLO’s residency in Lebanon, the GUPW derived their income from the dues of their twenty-five thousand members, private contributions, and some grants from European and UN agencies. Once the
PLO established its national treasury, known as the Palestine National Fund, in the mid-1970s, the GUPW began to rely on the Fund to supply teachers’ salaries and some operating funds. The PLO finally took over the financial management of all PLO-affiliated unions, including the women’s union. Branches of the GUPW outside of Lebanon continued to provide valuable and badly needed services to the Palestinian community in the diaspora, and not only to women. The GUPW President in Kuwait, Salwa al-Khadhra, was able to coordinate a massive effort in 1985 to provide schools for Palestinian children after the Kuwaiti government complained of lack of space in its congested public schools. Her efforts resulted in an arrangement availing Palestinian children, estimated at 120,000, of school space in the afternoon following the dismissal of Kuwaiti children. The cost of this operation was borne by Palestinian families, the Palestine National Fund, and the Kuwaiti government.

**WOMEN’S WORK COMMITTEES IN THE WEST BANK AND GAZA**

Absence of the PLO from the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War forced the female population to fall back on their own resources. The combined effect of Israeli military repression, economic migration of males, and Israeli confiscation of agricultural lands resulted in a massive shift in the direction of female-headed households. According to UNRWA’s statistics for 1983, out of 72,272 Palestinian families registered as refugees in the West Bank, 27,226 were headed by females. In the Gaza Strip, UNRWA’s figures showed 75,296 registered families, of whom 14,567 were headed by females. These figures, of course, do not include non-refugee families who may have experienced a similar development. Women were also forced to enter the labor force, but their lack of experience, particularly in the area of unionization, exposed them to considerable exploitation. Women began to enter three types of employment: unskilled wage labor within Israel proper, wage labor in Israeli factories in the West Bank, and self-employed labor within the family structure. Much of female employment in the Occupied Territories was centered around the Israeli-controlled garment industry, where they usually received wages 50 percent lower than compensation for similar work within Israel. Those women employed within the Israeli sector had to contend with long commuting hours, unequal pay, lack of social benefits, and absence of day-care services. Some of these problems were tackled individually by pioneering women who sought a political solution, and some collectively by organizations who ministered to the suffering female population. Some women, like Amal Wahdan, became active in the labor union at her
place of employment and worked hard to educate and involve other women. The difficulty was not only in finding a niche for herself in an all-male union, but also in convincing other female workers to invade this male-dominated territory. Amal Wahdan’s success in mobilizing and educating other women grew naturally out of her involvement with the women’s work committees. These committees organized special subsections to deal with labor issues, thereby making it easier for women bound by family traditionalism to broach such topics without any contact with males.28

The women’s work committees were a new phenomenon in the West Bank and Gaza which sought to address the drastic economic and political pressures resulting from Israel’s military occupation. Although an effort directed by and for women which was typical of the Palestinian history of self-help and gender solidarity, the work committees represented a different assessment of the women’s question. Whereas the charitable organizations dominating the Palestinian scene from the 1920s until the end of Jordanian period performed purely charitable work, the new committees focused on work-related problems. The committees also instilled a new spirit aimed at nurturing self-help and gender consciousness by sponsoring projects and not merely through acts of charity. The first of these groups, the Federation of Women’s Work Committees, emerged in 1978 and spawned 107 subcommittees with a membership of 4,000. The Federation (sometimes translated as the Union of Women’s Work Committees) for the first time targeted and organized village women. These were badly in need of services rarely offered by the urban elite women, such as vocational training in heritage crafts and in such basic marketable skills as sewing and weaving. For the first time in the history of social welfare organizations, the federation of work committees began to operate kindergartens as a service to working women and to educate them in the politics of unionization.29

The federation did not remain united for long and eventually splintered along ideological lines. The core group within the federation remained loyal to one of the PLO’s major leftist groups, namely the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Female members of the Communist Party organized their own Union of Palestinian Working Women’s Committees in 1980 and emphasized women’s economic rights and their role within labor unions. A year later, another group, the Palestinian Women’s Committees, was organized with the support of another PLO radical organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Of all the work committees, this one openly gave precedence to gender issues, elevating these above any national con-
siderations. The women's goal was to empower poorer and peasant women and to help them develop a working-class ethos. Numbering 1,450 women, this group was composed mainly of factory workers and support members. Finally, Fateh, the Arafat-led dominant group within the PLO, organized the Union of Women's Committees for Social Work in 1982. This union established kindergartens and literacy programs for women.\(^{30}\)

The exciting story of the women's work committees, however, cannot be appreciated through a description of their services and projects. A real appreciation of this radical shift in the direction of women's organizations can only be attained through an understanding of the general philosophy underlying this new social infrastructure. According to Rita Giacaman, a leading member of these committees, an expert on rural health conditions, and a professor at Birzeit University in the West Bank, the work committees were a response to the Israeli occupation. Writing in the twentieth year of the occupation, Giacaman stated that the Palestinians felt compelled to prevent the Israeli destruction of the Palestinian health, educational, and economic infrastructure. Since the occupation regime suppressed all political activity, the occupied population channelled their energies into social welfare activities. Outside assistance from the PLO's steadfastness Arab fund dispensed from Jordan and UNRWA's acts of pure charity were no longer adequate. The most grievously afflicted sector of the occupied population, which suffered the destruction of families, labor exploitation, and general economic deprivation, women finally rose to the occasion. Within this sector of the population, village women and those living in the refugee camps of the West Bank and Gaza suffered the most.\(^{31}\)

The urban women's movement, now made up largely of younger, university-educated women, in contrast to the older, socially prominent female leadership, initially sought to mobilize village women in order to resist the occupation. This political objective, it was soon realized, could not be achieved in the context of abject rural poverty and social deprivation. According to Giacaman, it was the discovery of the villages which inspired the women's work committees. Not only were the committees now focused on the needs of village women, such as health, education, and economic viability, but the thrust of the new organizations was development and not charity. Moreover, rural branches of these committees were run by village women in an attempt to build grass roots organizations more decentralized than the original urban social welfare groups. Now, the Israeli authorities became incapable of paralyzing an entire operation by imposing a prison sentence or house arrest on a limited number of leaders. By bringing urban and rural women
closer together, village women acquired greater gender consciousness as well, which was perceived by the female leadership as a necessary prerequisite for national liberation. Gender consciousness came naturally as a result of economic empowerment when village women experienced a measure of self-control over their lives. This explains the determination to shift emphasis from charity to development. The economic effect of the work committees’ activities was intended to evolve into autonomous programs.32

**TRANSFORMATION OF THE CHARITABLE ORGANIZATIONS**

Some of the traditional women’s social welfare organizations evolved into a hybrid form of charitable associations, combining elements of the old and the new social welfare structure of the West Bank and Gaza. The most prominent of this model was In’ash al-Usrah, or Sustenance of the Family, an organization dating back to the Jordanian period. Founded in 1965 with a budget of 500 dollars, In’ash began in a two-room apartment with a sewing machine and ten female students.33 By 1989, the organization had a budget of 180,000 dollars. At the beginning, eight wealthy Palestinians were persuaded to provide scholarships for eight female students, and by 1987, In’ash al-Usrah was able to provide loans and scholarships to 360 students. By the late 1980s, the organization employed 152 teachers and skilled individuals. Having started with a kindergarten serving 25 children, In’ash’s services are now offered to 150 children. There is also a boarding school for 132 orphaned children, all girls. A sponsorship program now supports 1,300 needy families with annual stipends of 500 dollars provided by private donors. There are eighty-five doctors who regularly treat the families of In’ash free of charge, and patients are often referred to al-Makased Hospital for free treatment.34

In’ash al-Usrah combined charitable works with development projects. Women from nearby villages were offered literacy classes in cooperation with Birzeit University. Women’s processed food products and home-made textiles were marketed, the number growing to two thousand women who were encouraged to produce out of their home base. The organization also established its own food-processing plant. The founder of In’ash, Samiha Khalil (Um Khalil), understood that opportunities for income-generating projects eventually lead to empowerment. Although not a feminist in the Western sense, Um Khalil recognized that these opportunities improved women’s standing within the family. Men began to allow wives to attend meetings and daughters to seek a university education. Mixing politics and social work also became more
acceptable, unlike in previous Palestinian periods when genteel women philanthropists and social workers scorned political activity. Um Khalil, despite her affinity for the pre-1967 generation, viewed her social work as an act of national defiance and steadfastness. She shared this view with the younger generation of the work committees, in the belief that empowering poorer women and keeping them on the land was an objective of national survival. Um Khalil is also credited with initiating the idea of economic boycotts of Israeli production. Indeed, her name symbolizes sumud or steadfastness in the face of overwhelming Israeli economic and political oppression.35

Often, Um Khalil’s nationalist strategy overshadowed her philanthropic work. Helping unskilled women develop their domestic production was intended to prevent their engagement in exploitative and demeaning employment in the Israeli sector. This, it was felt, would only strengthen Palestinian dependence on the occupation regime. Marketing these home-made products also pressured West Bank buyers not to purchase Israeli products. Underprivileged members of the occupied Palestinian society, however, were the most vulnerable to the economic lure of Israeli industries. Um Khalil’s In’ash, therefore, attempted to strengthen the national identity of underprivileged women by any means possible. This was accomplished through developing heritage crafts, public commemoration of national culture, a folklore museum, and an anthropological study of Palestinian villages.36

In’ash al-Usrah was clearly founded with nationalist ends in mind. The founder’s political agitation and defiance of the Israeli authorities earned her a spot on the three-person Palestinian National Guidance Committee, which coordinated peaceful resistance to the occupation regime in the West Bank and Gaza until 1987. It was in that year that a semi-violent movement of national resistance, the intifada, erupted and created a serious emergency for the Israelis. Primarily a boycott movement, the intifada leadership called on all Palestinians to render the Israeli military occupation inoperative through acts of economic boycotts and general strikes. It is in the context of this continuing national agitation that Um Khalil’s philanthropy can be understood. Her organization developed into a model of self-help and national resistance. “Funding is a political issue,” she once confessed to an interviewer. She added:

I have been approached by a number of American charitable organizations offering financial aid. I always ask where they got their money from. If it comes from the Congress of the United States, I reject it. I refuse to take money from the enemy of my people on principle. It is the same Congress that gives billions of dollars a
year to Israel in military aid and for funding illegal settlements on stolen Palestinian land.\textsuperscript{37}

In’ash would only accept funds from neutral and peace-loving American groups, such as the National Council of Churches. The rest of her foreign funds came from donations by Arab-American groups, from a well-known London-based Palestinian millionaire, Zein al-Mayyasi, from the Norwegian Agency for International Development, and the Association Medicale Franco-Palestinienne. Um Khalil was not only the most economically nationalistic among the female social welfare leaders, but she was also a consistent nationalist. Unlike the younger Western-educated leaders of the women’s work committees, Um Khalil championed causes with a distinct anti-feminist twist. Although conceding that having many children is a burden and a hardship for women, she often preached that national survival demanded releasing women’s natal potential to the fullest. Her society actually advertised that it will give two hundred prizes to women who produced the greater number of children.\textsuperscript{38} Um Khalil’s pro-natal views, though quite controversial, never determined the success or failure of her organization. Instead, all the women’s organizations, the old and the new, were mostly judged by their overall contribution to the economic survival of the occupied population.

THE DEVELOPMENT DEBATE

The women’s organizations in the West Bank and Gaza, nevertheless, did not dominate the field of philanthropy. First, there was the oldest charitable agency serving Palestinian refugees wherever they were found, and not only in Palestinian lands, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. UNRWA was created in 1948 specifically to provide humanitarian assistance to those Palestinians who were officially considered refugees. Aid was extended to the original three-quarter million Palestinian refugee population and to their descendants. UNRWA began with food rations and eventually established schools, training centers, and health clinics in the middle of refugee camps. The publications of UNRWA clearly demonstrate two crucial aspects of its operating philosophy. The first of these was UNRWA’s traditional approach to development, favoring males with income-generating training. The second visible characteristic of UNRWA was the absence of any visible nationalist orientation in its projects. Purely charitable relief work, UNRWA’s operations focused on eliminating poverty exclusively. The stated objective of this agency’s four training centers in the West Bank and Gaza
in 1986, for instance, was to find employment abroad for their graduates. These programs trained 359 male university graduates as teacher trainees for employment in the Arab Gulf states. UNRWA also began expanding its programs that year to include male and female physiotherapy training, construction technicians’ training, computer courses, business and shorthand, as well as laboratory work. The organization determined that the greatest demand in Saudi Arabia was for teachers first, then for people in the medical profession and in technical fields. Clearly, UNRWA did not subscribe to the ideology of *sumud*, or survival on the land, motivating the women’s social welfare projects. Um Khalil’s nationalist aspirations, by contrast, focused on projects which strengthened Palestinians’ will to struggle, persist, and remain on the land, and to resist joining the army of well-to-do expatriates in the Arab oil states.

UNRWA’s services for the female sector of the refugee population were also devoid of the rhetoric of empowerment and female liberation. Unlike the women’s work committees which focused on income-generating projects and grass roots building as means of strengthening nationalist resistance, UNRWA was satisfied with teachers’ and nurses’ training programs. Women employees of UNRWA who ran these female-training centers also reflected the genteel upbringing of Palestine’s old classes but none of the radicalism of the younger generation of the 1970s.

The West Bank and Gaza were also served by a large number of foreign NGOs. These were estimated to be 130 European and 40 North American NGOs. Local NGOs in the occupied West Bank and Gaza were estimated to be between 850 and 2,500. The foreign organizations developed programs in support of local Palestinian groups or implemented their own projects directly. The foreign NGOs have undertaken health, education, and rehabilitation programs, but have moved in recent years in the direction of agricultural, business, and community development projects. Both the local and foreign NGOs have attempted to fill a serious gap resulting from the absence of state institutions and government programs.

The conservative figure of 850 local NGOs does not include trade unions or professional organizations. Palestinian charitable societies account for almost 300 of these NGOs. Of this number, around 174 organizations are women’s NGOs, mostly specializing in income generating activities such as sewing and handicrafts. The women’s NGOs include 82 voluntary societies, 58 committees, 13 cooperatives, and 22 productive projects.

The foreign NGOs are expected in most cases to transfer their skills and administrative knowledge to the Palestinian NGOs, particularly to
women’s associations. This expectation has not always been met, although some cooperative experiences between these groups proved to be very successful. The Central Committee of the American Mennonite Church in the West Bank, which established a women’s sewing cooperative in the village of Surif in the Hebron district, is such a case. The Mennonites are among the most experienced in this line of work, having created one of the oldest NGO projects in the West Bank in 1953, the Palestinian Needlework Program. The project was intended to provide Palestinian women refugees with an income-generating activity. By the mid-1970s, five hundred women were employed turning out embroidery in six villages in the Hebron area. Initially, the project was run from the Mennonite Committee’s Jerusalem offices, and the output was marketed from shops in Jerusalem, the USA, and Canada. In 1976, however, a Palestinian female worker submitted a proposal to transfer the management of this program to the women employees. The committee then chose the village of Surif as a pilot for this proposal. The Surif cooperative was given the duties of distributing work orders, overseeing production, inspecting and dispensing monetary compensation, and keeping records. The Mennonite Committee retained control over marketing outlets. Village women apparently hesitated before undertaking this responsibility, but after a brief orientation program and visits to two nearby villages with similar projects, they plunged ahead. After awhile, women began to demand higher salaries and better equipment, two requests that were met with an explanation of the economics of such a cooperative venture. More importantly, the experience of managing a cooperative produced an inevitable process of social transformation. The women began to travel alone to other villages and to do their own banking. Many reported a new attitude of respect for their labor on the part of male family members.43

Most foreign NGOs, however, were criticized for their higher salaries and failure to transfer skills and technology to local agencies. Palestinian women’s NGOs, on the other hand, have been criticized by development experts for several shortcomings. Among these are the lack of administrative training and, more importantly, serious marketing strategies. These weaknesses became painfully apparent when the Gulf War deprived Palestinian NGOs of most of their Arab sources of funding and forced a scramble to enhance their marketing efforts to compensate for lost funds. The women’s NGOs, which always depended on external funding, whether Palestinian or foreign, were criticized for ignoring the market dynamics of their economic activities. The women’s NGOs generally relied on exhibits and appeals to nationalist sentiment to market their products and overlooked the imperative of cost-effective produc-
tion. On a separate note, the women’s NGOs were also taken to task for centralizing their activities around the personality of the founder. These women, referred to collectively as shakhsiyat (prominent figures or stars) such as Um Khalil, dominated the life of their agencies but failed to nurture a second generation of managers.\textsuperscript{44} Um Khalil, nevertheless, was so revered for her acts of resistance and dedication that she was able to run in January 1996, as a candidate for the position of President of the Palestine National Authority.\textsuperscript{45} Arafat’s easy victory over Um Khalil does not diminish her nationalist and feminist credentials. Indeed, it is arguable whether or not these fragile social welfare agencies dedicated to the survival of women would have thrived without the leadership of such flamboyant, charismatic, and nationalist women such as Um Khalil.

Finally, even though Palestinian women’s activism, both social and nationalist, never met with male resistance, it should be analyzed in light of the historic changes which are transforming Palestinian society today. Resistance to Jordanian and Israeli oppression has forced these agencies to play the role of civil society and fill a void created by the utter lack of state social services. With the conclusion of the Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement and the emergence of the Palestine National Authority as the quasi-government of the Arab population, Palestinian civil society will inevitably weaken. Experts predict that the Palestine Authority’s inevitable rush to institute a new set of government regulations; NGOs expected dependence on official Palestinian funding sources will diminish the political power and gender effectiveness of women’s social agencies. Both the cause of Palestinian democracy and the feminization of Palestinian society will suffer. Had the Palestinian struggle for nationhood and statehood lasted longer, it would have allowed women greater opportunities for development and political maturation. Now, they will have to contend with a national authority preoccupied with enormous problems and a general public indifferent to issues of gender mobilization.

**THE ROOTS OF WOMEN’S PHILANTHROPY IN EGYPT**

Egypt underwent extensive social change at the beginning of this century. Some of this change resulted from massive national agitation against the British occupation, accompanied by the mobilization of women. Egypt’s first feminist campaign was led by bourgeois women, both Muslim and Coptic, who sought to enhance feminist consciousness through involvement in nationalist agitation. Thus, the demands of the first Egyptian feminist organization to emerge on the scene in 1923,
the Egyptian Feminist Union, mirrored this intermixing of nationalism and feminism. The Feminist Union continued to present the Egyptian parliament with such demands as the retention of Egypt’s control over the Sudan and the withdrawal of British troops from the Suez Canal Zone. The women’s first agenda reflected feminists’ demands for political rights, such as voting rights, membership in parliament, and access to institutes of higher learning. The Feminist Union also agitated for the cancellation of polygyny and the restriction of the male privilege of summary divorce.46

If the social origins of the early generation of Egyptian feminists predisposed them toward the political and social objectives of middle-class women, philanthropy remained an assured avenue for public prominence. The career of Egypt’s foremost feminist and founder of the Feminist Union, Huda Sha’rawi, illustrates this inevitable experimentation with social welfare projects as a means of breaking the pattern of women’s isolation and domestic confinement. Even when Sha’rawi’s earliest ventures were viewed as a feminine form of noblesse oblige, they were also valuable as a sure way of acquiring organizational and agitational experience. Sha’rawi came into her work with the Feminist Union after establishing Mabarat Muhammad ‘Ali (Muhammad ‘Ali’s Institution) in 1908. This agency, which was co-founded with Princess ‘Ayn al-Hayat, provided sewing classes and a clinic for needy women and children.47

Islamic organizations, however, always recruited members of the working classes and Egypt’s peasant population in the cities. These required services that were rarely provided by the state; women, as always, were among the neediest in the slums of major cities. The woman who led Egypt’s first Islamic charitable organization, ironically, received her training earlier within the ranks of the secular Feminist Union. This was Labibeh Ahmad, who founded the women’s auxiliary of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1937, known as the Muslim Sisterhood, or Al-Akhawat al-Muslimat. Barely eight years after Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization bent on Islamizing society and the state, the need for recruiting women and gaining their support became apparent. Ahmad herself was attracted to the Brotherhood because of its resources and charitable works. In addition to the Brotherhood’s educational and recruitment programs, such as five hundred educational projects, fifty scout troops, and twenty athletic clubs, the organization built ten textile shops to train the orphaned and the poor. The Brotherhood also opened a health clinic to serve its membership, as well as a medical dispensary supplying free medicine. These projects, although primarily targeting the brotherhood’s male following, spilled over to the female relatives of the Muslim Brothers.48
Although Islamic groups normally ignore gender issues, the Muslim Sisterhood was founded especially to spread religious education among women and to instruct them in the ideal ways of raising and educating Muslim children. The Sisterhood reinforced Islamic social norms by creating a system of home visitation for secluded women who were unable to attend public meetings. The Muslim Sisterhood was founded simply as a committee made up of the wives of Muslim Brothers at Cairo and Isma‘iliyah. Ahmad became President of the Sisterhood’s Cairo headquarters. By 1948, 50 branches were established throughout Egypt. The committee of each Sisterhood elected a female president, a vice-president, a secretary, and a treasurer. The Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, however, remained the general director of the Sisterhood and was responsible for naming a male secretary as an emissary to the female organization. Guidelines governing the charitable projects of the Sisterhood needed the approval of the Brotherhood’s main office. The Sisterhood trained its recruits in food processing and canning, as well as sewing, the products of which were marketed by the committees of the organization. In the provinces, the committees of this women’s agency undertook the task of improving health conditions for the poor by directing them to public health facilities and other charitable organizations. Not enthusiastic about issues championed by other feminists, such as the removal of the veil and its negative impact on women, Ahmad preached obedience to husbands and dedication to the family. Her only pro-feminist views called for repealing Islamic divorce laws and forcing the sterilizations of poor women.49

THE ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS FACE STATE REPRESION

Women’s philanthropy along the lines of Labibeh Ahmad’s Sisterhood was a traditional form of charity provided by the male parent organization and under its direction. During the late 1940s and 1950s, however, the Brotherhood entered a phase of deadly confrontation with the socialist regime of Jamal Abd al-Nasser. This struggle ended up with the massive destruction of the Brotherhood’s infrastructure and the imprisonment of its officers. Remarkably, what saved the organization from total demise was the determination of the president of another Islamic women’s association to remain independent of the Brotherhood. This was the renowned Islamic activist and political leader, Zeinab al-Ghazzali who founded in 1937 the Society of Muslim Women, Jama‘at al-Sayyidat al-Muslimat. Al-Banna asked her to merge her organization with the Brotherhood, but she and her executive committee refused. The independence of the Society of Muslim Women was appreciated later.
when the government decided to dismantle the Brotherhood in 1948 and seize all its assets. When state repression of the Brotherhood and all its branches intensified during the Nasserite period, Zeinab al-Ghazzali’s charitable agency became a convenient refuge for the survivors of the repression. The society also played a crucial role as the emissary to their wives and families of the imprisoned Brothers. Following the trials of 1954, which targeted the active male members of the Brotherhood, Ghazzali and female relatives of other prominent Brothers organized relief efforts to assist the suffering Islamic families. Al-Ghazzali’s efforts benefited all members of the beleaguered Brotherhood, especially the males who were released after severe interrogation.50

Part of Al-Ghazzali’s organized campaign to rescue this important sector of the Egyptian polity entailed coordinating efforts with the government of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime, which feared the destabilizing effect of Nasser’s pan-Arab socialism, opened its doors to the persecuted Brotherhood. Al-Ghazzali led an all-female delegation to perform the Islamic pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia in 1957, in a bold effort to relocate many of them in this friendly Islamic state. While there, she submitted a memorandum to the Saudi monarch, asking that the daughters of the imprisoned Brothers be educated in Saudi Arabia.51 This turned out to be the first wave of a massive Islamic migration from Egypt to the Arab oil-rich states, a migration of enormous significance in later years. It was in this Islamic cultural milieu that exiled Egyptian Islamic activists adopted the values of Islamic capitalism, acquired habits of Islamic dress such as the veil, and began to associate financial success with Islamic observances. When these generations of exiled Egyptians, beginning with the female students of Al-Ghazzali, returned home in the 1970s, the Islamic revolution began in earnest.

Upon her return to Egypt in 1957, Al-Ghazzali continued with her community-wide relief effort, which raised funds from the faithful to support the children and wives of the imprisoned and martyred Brothers. This humanitarian campaign was coordinated by women in the mistaken belief that no state apparatus would victimize society’s weaker elements. The effort was so massive that she described extensive bookkeeping and funds spent not only on sustaining the families, but also on educating their children. Fund-raising and the distribution of resources had to be done secretly under the gaze of the security agencies. In time, state repression caught up with her and she suffered imprisonment and torture. The most serious charge directed at Al-Ghazzali while on trial was the disbursement of four thousand Egyptian pounds to the families of the imprisoned Brothers, for which she was sentenced to twenty-five years at hard labor.52
The new phase of Islamic revivalism, which began in the 1970s, witnessed a successful campaign to create exclusive Islamic investments and a social-welfare structure alongside those of the state. Egypt began to experience the phenomenon of Islamic banking and Islamic corporations financed by the activities of the exiled Islamic leaders in the Arab oil states. Beside al-Rayyan and al-Sa’ad companies, Muslim groups founded a successful monthly magazine named *Al-Da’wa*, which also benefited from advertisements by other Islamic companies. The magazine’s circulation reached 78,000, and its Islamic advertisers included bookshops, food companies, and foreign car dealerships. The new Islamic social welfare network included clinics which were located in or near mosques, schools, day-care facilities, and youth clubs. Of these, the most heavily used by Egypt’s lower middle-class and the urban poor were the health clinics. The clinics were staffed by dedicated doctors and nurses and offered services that were often superior to those available at government facilities. Charging modest fees and supported by the community, these clinics were used regularly by families and by women. The total number of Islamic NGOs, according to the registration files of the Ministry of Social Affairs, is 8,000, out of a total of 14,000 NGOs operating in Egypt today. The Islamic clinics serving the public at large are around 1,000 to 2,000 throughout the country, and between 300 and 350 in Cairo alone. Situated generally within Cairo’s poorer sections or in the less costly outlying suburbs, the clinics range from those operated by two doctors and one nurse to those employing 200 doctors and 200 nurses and clerical staff. The average-sized clinic employs ten doctors each. The clinics offer extensive medical services, including surgery, gynecology, dentistry, and x-ray services. Preferred by the general public to government’s free health services, the Islamic clinics boast better-paid doctors, more hygienic conditions, and a highly motivated staff.

The clinics are supported by community donations, which are collected as *zakat*, and particularly by large sums given by wealthy entrepreneurs. It is also clear that decisions are made by members of freely elected community assemblies who are predominantly male. The clinics are not run by women, for the benefit of women. Muslim female doctors and nurses who work in these clinics, however, are expected to be veiled and adhere to accepted standards of Islamic behavior. A researcher discovered that the clinics have no Christian doctors, although there is no policy which prohibits their hiring, and Christian families in need also patronize these centers for a simple fee. Male and female doctors offer gynecological services, and there is no special effort to cater to women’s needs exclusively. Some doctors and directors of these clinics claim that the clinics are in the secular philanthropic tradition of
Mabarat Muhammad Ali, founded by Princess Ayn al-Hayat. All overt Islamic fundamentalist propaganda is avoided.\textsuperscript{56}

Although religious proselytization within these clinics is kept to a minimum, the clinics’ very existence, let alone their efficient performance, exposes the inadequacy of the government’s social infrastructure. But women are neither mobilized by these Islamic services, nor given a leadership role. This is not surprising in view of the general Islamic philosophy regarding the activation of women. Zeinab al-Ghazzali shed some light on this in the 1960s, when she was interrogated by the police prior to her imprisonment. In response to her interrogators’ questioning as to the extent of her leadership role within the Islamic Brotherhood, she vehemently denied any ambitions for high office if the Brotherhood ever came to power. She emphasized that when the Islamic state finally emerges, women will be happy to return to their natural kingdom to raise the future generations of the nation’s men.\textsuperscript{57} Clearly, women’s activation and mobilization was not an open-ended principle, but an emergency measure for emergency times. In Egypt of the early 1970s, with the influx of Islamic wealth from the oil-rich countries of exile during the 1950s and 1960s, and under the benign gaze of the Sadat regime, Islamic activities were tolerated. There was no need to disrupt the natural order of things and thrust women onto the public arena.

When Islamic organizations accelerated their activities on the campuses of Egyptian universities during the 1970s, however, the need to mobilize female students became obvious. This mobilization was accomplished through charitable works in the form of badly needed services designed to ease the dismal conditions surrounding university life. Because of these services offered by Jama’at Islamiyya, an organization particularly active in student circles, student organizations between 1975 and 1979 were dominated by Islamic activists. By 1979, the Jama’at succeeded in defeating the previously powerful pro-Marxist and pro-Nasserite student organizations. Much of this success was due to the Jama’at’s ability to respond to the rising congestion at the universities resulting from the availability of free public education. Female students, particularly those from the provinces, had to contend with packed buses, dismal lodging facilities, and constant harassment by male students. The Jama’at provided bus services exclusively for the use of veiled female students and successfully demanded separate lecture-hall seating of female students by row. Veiled students, nurtured and strengthened by these Islamic organizations, became a visible presence on campuses, especially at election time and during political demonstrations.\textsuperscript{58}
CONCLUSION

Naturally, these all-male Egyptian efforts on behalf of women did not spawn the kind of Islamic feminist leadership exemplified by Zeinab al-Ghazzali during the 1950s and 1960s. As the Islamic movement in Egypt grew stronger, males assumed leadership in all aspects of public organizational life. Even acts of philanthropy, whether Islamically sanctioned, like the zakat — based activities, or politically driven, like the services of Jamma‘at Islamiyya, were either directed at the Islamic family or were politically motivated. Ironically, despite denials of any feminist ambitions, the female-dominated philanthropy of al-Ghazzali’s era brought forward a certain leadership cadre whose influence and effectiveness cannot be denied. The male-dominated activities of the Sadat era, however, produced the phenomenon of controlled female mobilization. Paradoxically, Islamic philanthropy strengthened women’s roles in the universities and as members of the new Islamic organizations without necessarily empowering them.

Palestinian women, on the other hand, were strengthened through adversity and because of the absence of males. By creating a badly needed social infrastructure, the Palestinians were able to direct their philanthropy toward women. More importantly, Palestinian charitable organizations responded to changing political conditions with agility and foresight. Remarkably, the Palestinian feminist movement was able to transform itself from pure acts of charity, to organized acts of political and economic resistance. Their goal became increasingly the empowerment of women, and they attempted this through economic activities. But there is no question that the superimposition of a feminist agenda on their social agenda was tolerated by male society because of its relevance to the nationalist struggle. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Palestinian women’s associations today is how to retain their leadership role within Palestinian society when both their philanthropy and independence are threatened with political stability and male-takeover.

NOTES


17. Abdel-Hadi, 9.


20. Rishmawi, 86.


22. Abdel-Hadi, 9–11.


32. Ibid.
33. Sayigh, 11.
34. Najjar, 121–23.
36. Ibid.
37. Sayigh, 11.
38. Najjar, 121–23.
40. "Pioneer in Education for Palestinian Women," Palestine Refugees Today, UNRWA Newsletter 112 (October 1985): 2–3. This article celebrates the twenty-three-year career of a prominent British-trained educator, Saba’ Arafat, who served as Field Education Officer of the West Bank. Another prominent UNRWA educator was In’am al-Mufti who directed the women’s teacher training center in Ramallah and later became the first female cabinet minister in Jordan.
48. Ibid., 72, 116–17.
49. Ibid., 118–19, 140, 147–48.
51. Ibid., 30–32.


56. Ibid., 17–21.

57. Zeinab al-Ghazzali, 144.

58. Kepel, 129–44.