

**IDENTITY, GENDER AND ACADEMIC "SUMUD" (STEADFASTNESS)–  
THE QUEST OF LIBERATION OF PALESTINIAN FEMALE HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS IN RAMALLAH**

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**Abstract**

*This paper deals with the issue of the religious and national identities of a group of female Palestinian high school students. This issue remains highly charged among Palestinians; social scientists and women rights activist have claimed Palestinian women are oppressed once as Palestinians and again as women living in a patriarchal male dominated society. For these students, academic achievement and a career pursue is seen as their way to participate in the national and individual plight for liberation.*

**Key words:** *women; gender; Palestinian female; high school students; Ramallah*

**Introduction - Gender roles in human society**

Women shape their lives to fit around family needs and the domestic domain much more than men do (Filfil, 1999). The chores of raising the children and taking care of the house bind women to their houses. Women are responsible for their house but men control the resources and therefore women have to adapt their lives according the decisions of men. There is an unequal distribution of power and it is more acute among the lower class because they have fewer resources available. Women are more likely than men to be poor and have less control over household finances.

Notwithstanding, with the expanding presence of women and their growing participation in the workforce, their status raised and so their power within the household and the decision making process. Nevertheless, women and children spend most of their time at home.

### **Rationality – Woman empowerment**

The term "human empowerment" was used in the 1970's in order to describe the struggle for social justice and gender equality economic, social and political structure's transformations. Nowadays the term connotes participation in the process of decision making, increase access to productive resources and expanded choices for women as individuals.

This change in terminology has brought limited changes in gender relations and gender roles. Women are still isolated from playing a role in public life. There are those who claim any type of true empowerment will not be achieved in a society living colonized and under a continuous crisis (Idem).

According to Kuttab (2010) a definition of empowerment needs to include an emphasis on agency and radical change as well as a link to the notion of power related to authority, domination and collective action for liberation (or in the case of the Palestinian a resistance to occupation).

This could be achieved through gaining knowledge, acquiring an education and therefore being able to contribute to the Palestinian society at large through a profession.

Empowerment based on the everyday struggle for survival in Palestinian authority means to claim the struggle to assert natural and gender identity through claiming women' rights as an integral component of the natural struggle.

In other words, empowerment can be defined as a revolutionary process and an integral part of the social struggle against occupation as well as against

patriarchy. This definition focuses on the process, on agency and on engagement (of women) on national resistance for social liberation.

A softer approach to explain academic view is the perception that when a woman performs excellence in the work she does, she is then able to impose her personality and therefore gain social respect. While the first interpretation of empowerment puts the emphasis on collective empowerment, which depends on radical social change, the second interpretation deals mainly with personal traits. Other perspectives differentiate between the collective and the individual but claim both processes are in fact interrelated.

#### **An empowerment in the society of Palestinian women**

Palestinian women's civil organizations address three kinds of empowerment: political, economic and legal. Political empowerment is seen by most organizations as related to politics in its classical context or to any other activity related to national struggle or to participation in national decision-making process (gender, human rights, women rights, women agency and leadership). Legal empowerment reflects a range of issues including the provision of social, psychological and legal services for women (protection of rights, strengthening women's identity and advocacy).

Economic empowerment focuses mainly on independence as a prerequisite to empowerment and considers women's participation in the work force a right that has to be protected.

Thus far, micro-scale institutions, that directing efforts to empower female entrepreneurs, have only were able to alleviate them out of poverty but were not able to truly empower them in every aspects of society. These institutions have focused on individual empowerment and less on collective empowerment. Meaning, emphasizing on instrumentalist rather than transformative approaches to empowerment.

Therefore, experts believe that Palestinian women are suffering from three distinct levels of oppression by national, social and economic forces. These three factors are the "triangle of oppression of Palestinian women".

Following the second Intifada, Palestinian women created new and creative ways of activism for civil rights, that include mixed gender community organizations which seek to introduce dynamics that are challenging to the patriarchal structure of the traditional community organizations in the Palestinian society.

The Ramallah Friends school has actually given female students a supportive frame, a physical space in which they can exchange ideas and plan activities to meet their needs and liberate themselves (at least partly and temporarily) from the triangle of oppression.

Whether organizations prioritize individual or collective empowerment, it becomes clear that in the Palestinian context there is a need to tie empowerment to the everyday resistance to occupation and see it as part and parcel of a comprehensive process that links national resistance to social and economic liberation (independence).

The major constrain to achieve liberation and transformation is the alienation that renders individuals as powerless, marginalized and excluded from the political process.

The girls' goal is to take education in order to increase their chances to obtain a profession which might allow them to be involved in the political process, the process of decision making and therefore fully participate in public life.

### **Patriarchal societies and gender equality**

The patriarchal structure of the Palestinian family and society gives man authority over women, within the family as well as on the public domain (Haj-Yahia, 2005).

Consequently, men have advantages in resources, and are seen as having superior personal characteristics, skills and abilities. Therefore, men are expected to be better able to fulfill themselves, be more dominant and dominate women (Idem).

Palestinian society encourages the socialization and educating individuals for compulsive masculinity. Boys from very early stages are raised to maintain their masculinity and therefore they might develop hostility towards girls and women, they are raised to view them as inferior and learn to treat them aggressively (Idem).

More often than not, women in patriarchal societies are subject to economic constraints and discrimination within and outside of the family. This leaves the women with very few alternatives and the perceived status of jobs and occupations available for them is viewed as inferior to the ones open for men. For these reasons, women earn less than men and continue to be dependent on their male spouses (Idem).

Women in the Palestinian, as in other patriarchal societies, bear most of the burden of raising their children, and neither the society nor the state assists them in coping with this obligation

The most important roles assigned to women within the Palestinian patriarchal society are those of wives and mothers, therefore, women will not be fulfilled unless she is married.

According to that, the welfare of the children is dependent upon the classical family model of two parents residing in the same household. Following that trend of thought, a divorcee or single parenthood are seen as negative (Idem).

Men, on the other hand, are free to choose how much to invest in their roles as fathers and husbands. Generally speaking, patriarchal societies are more

tolerant of fathers who neglect their family obligations but much less towards women who do so.

Patriarchal societies post the risk of fostering a negative self-image among women due the emphasis put on achievement and competitiveness which are commonly associated with masculinity. Society expects women to support their husbands' fulfillment, even at the price of neglecting their own aspirations and dreams. These messages prevail in the private as well as in the public sphere of life (Idem).

#### **Normalizing live as resilience and coping with crisis**

A qualitative research study on the construct of resilience among Palestinian high school children in Ramallah based on focus groups with 321 male and female students from 15 different schools supported previous research which emphasized the value of supportive relationships such as family and friends. The research pointed to the fact that political participation and education are vital to a sense of identity and political resistance (Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Naser and Boyce, 2008).

The bottom line of the research and its main conclusion was that the students are active in finding means of normalizing everyday life as core part of fostering resiliency within abnormal conditions of life.

"A picture of resilience that reveals contradictions and tensions", the researchers talk about a fluid and dynamic nature of resilience" that reflects on the one hand the youth desire for order, while on the other hand they complain about emotional distress and boredom. Feelings of desperation were mixed with endless optimism.

#### **So how did the concept of resilience develop within the Palestinian society?**

According to the authors of the research the concept of resilience developed in predominantly Western settings and it ignores "local idioms of

communal care and support". Therefore, the researchers arrive to the conclusion that the search for psychological well being and justice are not mutually exclusive.

The answers of the students at the Friends school in Ramallah also depicted complex captures of simultaneity of normality with disruption of life, similarly to the way the students of the resilience research did.

The subject of resilience conduce us to discuss the Palestinian concept of "Sumud" (steadfastness) which is an idea and a political strategy of dialectics between oppression and resistance.

Originally sumud was defined as a strong determination to stay in the country and on the land. When people use the concept nowadays, they give it meanings more plural, democratic and close to people's day-to-day life experiences (Rijke and van Teeffelen, 2014).

The concept dates back at least to the days of the British Mandate over Palestine but as a national symbol it only started been used during the 1960's. Prototypes of sumud can be found in the efforts of peasants whose olive trees have been uprooted by Israeli settlers and replanted by them, the family's actions to rebuild a house which has been destroyed by Israeli authorities or in the plight of Palestinians in Israel who fight for equal rights. However, nowadays the concept is more attached to the sense of resilience (Idem).

According to Palestinians the concept of sumud entails a determination to exist through being steadfast and rooted to the land. This concept is important because it is located at the heart of the resilience. (Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Naser and Boyce, 2008, p. 292).

The authors of the research above mentioned encountered several recurring themes (five): the dehumanization in occupation i.e. living under military occupation and being exposed to violence); economic misery (which

might be more felt or enhanced in the villages than in the city due to the building of the separation wall); sharing and support (the value of supportive relationships from friends, peers and families as a coping method to deal with distress); and most important of all, in the specific case of this article, making life as normal as possible (perform a range of routines and rituals to establish structure and stability within home and school / homework and house chores. This balance is particularly acute in the case of girls. Some boys work with their families but most, similarly to what happens elsewhere, spend most of their free time watching TV, reading, listening to music, visiting relatives or hanging out with friends. Some girls spend their afternoon reading, listening or praying the Koran.

According to the researchers, following the gender roles within the Palestinian society, as expected, boys were found to enjoy a greater degree of freedom, and they occupied their time in sports / outdoors oriented activities while girls tended to stay home pursuing more solitary hobbies such as reading, writing, drawing etc... (Idem, p. 295).

One of the most critical components of running a normal life is for children and teens to go to school. The time they spend at school provide both an anchor and a sense of consistency.

The fifth and last identified theme identified by the researchers was the political participation and education. This theme refers to political activism (stone throwing, going to demonstrations, etc.... In this respect, because of the families put more restrictions on girls, they were less politically active, at least in the common sense of the word.

In the case of the girls, instead of direct political action, the pursuit of education played a very cardinal role in forming and maintaining political identity and commitment (Idem, p. 295).



This was a very central and recurrent issue that kept been raised over and over again throughout my own research. Girls literally felt they were fighting against occupation through gaining an education.

Due to social restrictions, girls express resilience through different lenses in comparison to boys: "The very act of going and being at school becomes more than an ordinary daily activity. Commitment to education signifies an individual and collective act of defiance, reinforcing a sense of shared beliefs and communal belonging" (Idem, p. 296).

Among the main conclusions of that research suggests a unique feature of resilience that lies on its ordinariness: "resilience is reframed as a dynamic process embedded in agency and everyday practices. The incapacity to endure has to be understood within a micro context of ordinary life...For Palestinian youth, resilience is rooted in the capacity to make life as normal as possible" (Idem, p. 296).

As we will see in the discussion of the findings of my research, this conclusion, is largely supported by the findings of my research.

Social agencies such as the family and the school provide organization and structure within everyday life. And therefore, the degree to which Palestinian youth share with youth elsewhere similar aspirations is very striking. Just as youth elsewhere, Palestinian youth are interested in education, travel, romance / relationships and economic opportunities.

According to Summerfield (2002) recovery is reached through the resumption of the ordinary rhythms of everyday life i.e. the familial, socio-cultural, religious and economic activities that make the world comprehensible.

### **Methodology**

During a research field work for a dissertation on the influences of the school over the identities of high school students in Ramallah, we interviewed

about 400 eleventh and twelve grade students of a public school and the Friends (Quaker) private school in Ramallah. The research was based on a questionnaire which included mainly close questions with a few open ended questions.

### **Findings**

After having described the methodology and described the concepts that use as basis for this article, I will focus in this section on the findings regarding the different perceptions of the students related to three different fields of inquiry: ideological factors (belonging to the Arab nation, nationalism (belonging to Palestine, belonging to Oriental and Western cultures); non ideological factors (language, family, heritage, and place of residence and friends / peers) and the influence of school variables (vision, principal, teacher, curriculum, pedagogy).

#### **Ideological factors**

As we see from the table 1, there were significant statistical differences found in regards the Arab and the Palestinian components of the identities of male and female students. Regarding the Arab identity differences were found since a much higher number of female respondents claimed the Arab identity is not very important (45.0% versus 28.4% of male respondents).

As for the Palestinian component of their identity, the most substantial differences were found for the respondents claiming the Palestinian component is completely important to them (68% of males versus 53.8% of females).

Table 1 Perceived importance of ideological variables by gender (percentage of two upper categories)			
Variable	Male	Female	A
Arab	54.9	42.1	.009
Palestinian	88.7	91.2	.004
Oriental culture	49.4	39.7	no statistical significant difference

Western Culture	40.9	38.2	no statistical significant difference
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We also asked interviewees to state how religion and homeland are important for them. Homeland is understood here as a paradigm of nationalistic feelings. The following analysis is based on the respondents' responses to these two questions. In order to ease the presentation of findings, we condensed their responses to the top categories i.e. those stating the variables are completely or very important for them and the lower categories i.e. those for whom the variables are not very important or not important at all.

In order to find differences in the perception religion and homeland we analyzed them according to background variables (gender, education, residence, religion and obviously type of school).

In general, we might say that since the percentage of answers regarding homeland in the top categories are higher in comparison to the responses regarding religion, one might be inclined to think that the importance respondents attached to religion is lesser in comparison to the importance attached to homeland.

As for the findings related to religion, we learn that being male, having less education, living outside the city, belonging to the Muslim faith and studying at the public school increment the chances the respondent will state religion is very or completely important for them. As for religion, all differences found were statistically substantial.

It is worthwhile emphasizing the wide differences between the perceived importances of religion for the students of both schools. While a marked majority of the students of the Friends school (63.8%) claimed religion is not so important

or not important at all, 94.3% of the students of the public school assured religion is very or completely important for them.

Most of the results related to the perceived importance of the homeland are not statistically substantial, except those related to gender ( $\alpha = .004$ ) and the ones related to religion ( $\alpha = .024$ ). This does not mean that they are weaker or less valid but that there are no statistical differences found between different populations. In fact, these results show that higher percentages of the population consider the homeland to be very or completely important.

#### **Non ideological factors**

We found fewer statistical differences between the students of both schools in regards the non-ideological factors comparing with the differences found related to the ideological factors. The only statistical differences found were in the case of the perception of the importance of friends by gender and the perception of friends by the parent's education. Three other, nearly statistically significant relationships, were found: language by gender ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ); family by gender ( $\alpha = 0.055$ ) and friends by type of school ( $\alpha = 0.058$ ).

Variable	Male	Female	Total
Not important at all	8 3.7%	4 2.3%	12 3.1%
Not very important	27 12.4%	10 5.8%	37 9.5%
Very much	65 29.8%	66 38.6%	131 33.7%
Completely important	118 54.1%	91 53.2	209 53.7%

Total	218	171	389
	100%	100%	100%

Although the difference between the genders regarding the perceived importance of language is not statistically significant, we can see that twice as many male respondents considered the language to be not important at all or not very important (16.1%) in comparison with 8.1% of the female respondents.

Table 3 Perceived importance of family by gender			
Variable	Male	Female	Total
Not important at all	5 2.3%	1 0.6%	6 1.5%
Not very important	13 5.9%	15 8.9%	28 7.2%
Very much	45 20.5%	50 29.6%	95 24.5%
Completely important	156 71.2%	103 60.9%	259 66.8%
Total	219 100%	169 100%	388 100%

As we see from table 3 there are differences between the slightly higher proportion of females considering the family to be very important (29.6%) compared with 20.5% among male respondents. We also see a similar higher proportion of male respondents considering the family to be completely important (71.2%) in comparison with 60.9% among female respondents.

A third difference according to the male – female divide was found regarding the importance of friends. While the differences between men and women regarding language and family were not significant, regarding the friends we find statistically significant differences.

Variable	Male	Female	Total
Not important at all	8 3.7%	13 7.6%	21 5.4%
Not very important	25 11.4%	27 15.8%	52 13.3%
Very much	60 27.4%	56 32.7%	116 29.7%
Completely important	126 57.5%	75 43.9%	201 51.5%
Total	219 100%	171 100%	390 100%

From the findings of table 4 we might conclude that female respondents slightly consider friends to be less important when compared to male respondents. While 57.5% of male respondents consider friends to be completely important, less than half females (43.9%) consider friends to be completely important.

Strangely enough, when we discussed ideological variables, males were more inclined to suggest an emphasized importance of ideological factors. This might strengthen the notion of the individual as having multiple identities and therefore considering ideological as well as non-ideological variables as very or completely important in order to assess who they are, might seem a plausible way of reasoning.

### **Feelings at school statements**

The interviewees were requested to point how much they agree or disagree with a series of statements describing their feelings at school. After having analyzed the perceptions of the students regarding the importance of the school factors I ask to analyze a few of the statements describing the students' feelings / assessments of their situation at school.

Due the nature of the interest of this research, I found appropriate to describe the following ones in particular: I feel part of the school; sometimes I feel I don't belong here, I feel very different from most other students; I feel very good at school and last but not least, I am proud to belong to this school.

There were no statistical differences between genders in respect with any of the statements. Most of the students, regardless their gender, agree or completely agree with the statement of their feeling of being part of the school. That is the case of 80.7% of the males and 83.6% of the female students. Most students disagree or completely disagree with the statement "sometimes I feel I don't belong here" (65.8% of male and 62.5% of female respondents). A little over half the students feel "very different from most other students" (51.3% of male and 55.9% of female respondents). The vast majority of students (64.5% of the males and 72.9% of female students) feel very good at school. A slightly larger proportion of females (83.5%) in comparison with 72.4% of males agree or completely agree they are proud to belong to their school.

### **Self identification questions**

Besides the influence of gender over ideological and non ideological factors, participants were requested to define themselves in their own words. In these definitions we find many of the factors that were discussed in the first part of this article.

Following I bring a few of the self definitions by female students at both Palestinian schools:

- A girl who likes reading, studying and succeeding in life. I want to be outstanding in my studies and in life in general
- Ambitious. I do a lot in order to reach my goals and dreams, I am self confident and I don't hate (Female, public school, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Urban, Muslim, non practitioner)
- Ambitious, interested in reading and culture. I dream to continue to university studies in spite the difficulties surrounding us (Female, public school, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Urban, Muslim, non practitioner)
- I aspire to become a nurse, want to invest in my education. I like soccer and hope the Palestinian curriculum will change soon (Female, public school, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Urban, Muslim, religious)
- Wants to become a chef and get the highest prizes in the profession and to become the best chef of all (Female, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, public, village, Muslim, non-practitioner)
- I am one of the best students at school. I hope to become either a social worker or a nurse
- I dream about becoming someone important in my society and fighting for equality of rights for women (female, twelve grade, Muslim, non practitioner)
- I am a person who comes to school and hopes to be a university student. I am an optimist person and enjoy helping others. I have a good heart and also have negative characteristics just as anybody else (female, eleventh grade, non practitioner Muslim)
- I am ambitious. My studies are the most important thing in life (female, eleventh grade, Muslim non-practitioner)



- I am an ambitious individual. I do a lot in order to fulfill my dreams. I want to get to university and become a personality who brings benefits to our homeland and society (female, eleventh grade, Muslim religious)

- A Palestinian Arab student whose goal is to become a known member of society (Female, public school, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Urban, Muslim, non practitioner)

It would be safe to claim we found a pronounced tendency among female, eleventh grade students at the public school, to define themselves using ideological religious – nationalistic terms. Here I mention only a few examples:

- I like travelling with my girlfriends, my goal is to become a psychologist and be successful. I would like the matriculation exams be annulled. I hope Palestine will free itself from the occupation (Female, public school, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, urban, religious Muslim and only one of her parents completed high-school)

- I am Arab who loves the ancient tradition, loves folk dances. A proud Palestinian (Female, public school, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, urban, religious Muslim and only one of her parents completed high-school)

- I am a proud Palestinian, a Muslim Arab. My dream is one day to get to Paris (Female, public school, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, urban, non practitioner Muslim, neither one of her parents completed high school).

- I am a Muslim Arab. Loves music, swimming and mathematics. I love my family and friends. My dream is to travel abroad. I am a Palestinian (Female, public school, eleventh grade, lives in a refugee camp. Identifies herself as a religious Muslim, and her parents have very basic education).

- I am an Arab who belongs to the Umma. All my goals are to succeed and achieve a good education, study business administration and get a

nice salary (Female, public school, eleven grade, urban, non practitioner Muslim, one of her parents have an academic degree)

### **Conclusion Discussion**

The issues of gender equality and the special place and attention women receive were reflected in the responses of many female students who put women's issues very high on their agenda, emphasizing they would like to defend and advocate women's rights when they are older. It was also common for female students at Friends to raise the issue of been more capable of developing relationships with boys thanks to the school's mixed character. None of the male students at Friends raised either one of those issues.

From my humble opinion, the reason for the attention given by girls to the issues of gender equality and the coupling of these issues with the issue of achieving academic excellence derives from the concept of academic sumud. The notion that Palestinian girls find at school a venue to undermine the triangle oppression in which they live is widely supported by the findings of the research. Only by succeeding at school and acquiring a profession they will be able to contribute to Palestinian public life, to their country and their society. Female students participate in the Palestinian uprising not by throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers but by throwing good marks and gaining access to university. This solution is not only for the benefit of nationalistic or patriotic goal, not only in order to liberate themselves as Palestinians, but in order to liberate themselves as oppressed women in a patriarchal society.

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