

Strategies Against Patriarchy: Sexualized Political Activism of Palestinian Israeli Women on Campus

ABSTRACT

Based on a study of Palestinian Israeli women student activists, non-western models are used for negotiating patriarchy. The public nature and visibility of activism brings these women face-to-face with patriarchal conceptions of sexuality, forcing them to struggle against them in order to continue their political activities. The article explores how Palestinian Israeli women students develop a multiplicity of strategies, based on liberal participation and the power invested in sexuality by Arab-Islamic culture, to construct new enabling identities. By creating innovative sexual performances, they conflate their political and sexual struggles on the liberal basis of equality and rights. In the Arab context of communal interest in and control of women's sexuality, usurping one's sexuality goes far beyond merely participating in a liberal sexual contract. Rather, the centrality of sexuality makes liberal struggles around sexuality a powerful way of challenging patriarchy.

WOMEN ON CAMPUS

IN THE HISTORY OF THE State of Israel, nearly all Palestinian Israeli¹ members of Parliament and mayors of Arab cities and towns have been men.² All major male Palestinian political figures in Israel were at one point active in one of the four university Arab Student Unions (ASU) making the ASU a breeding ground and a stepping stone to national political involvement. Today, a small but growing number of young university women participate as student politicians at the universities in officially equivalent roles alongside men in the university Palestinian political parties. The novelty and small number of women in the student political leadership makes them highly visible.

I look at the models of “political woman” these Palestinian Israeli women activists construct for themselves and how they contest patriarchy in their self-representations as political women. I will show how university politics becomes an arena for women’s sexual subjectification, rather than objectification. Listening to their narratives on activism, we will be informed of how women can challenge patriarchal assumptions through their performance in the political arena.

Over the past two decades, Palestinian Israeli women’s participation in higher education has been significantly increasing. Whereas in 1973, women comprised only 15% of the Palestinian Israeli university student population,³ by 1999 (the time of this study) they comprised 40% of this population at The Hebrew University.⁴ Abu Baker claims that higher education has been a major factor in the move of Palestinian Israeli women into the public sphere, but mostly in alternative “public” arenas, such as non-profit organizations dealing with feminist and/or women’s issues.⁵ A few women have been able to etch a space for themselves out of the exclusiveness of Arab patriarchy in national party politics, but even those women who have found their way to city councils and party candidate lists have not risen high enough to win local mayoral elections or seats in the Parliament.⁶ In local politics, women primarily take backstage, informal roles due to political organization on *hamula* lines and thus the overlap of public (campaign) and private (family) spheres.⁷ This means that the struggle of Palestinian citizens for equality and recognition within Israel has and is carried out primarily by men and with little attention to women’s issues in general and to the specific needs of women in the subjugated Palestinian population in particular.

Thus, women student political activists are trailblazers into a traditionally male-dominated public sphere. This study focuses on the women’s strategies for making a space for themselves in politics, and not on the actual content of their political activism. A rich literature already exists on women’s involvement in national activism in the Arab world and the possibility of their concomitant advancement of feminist goals. This literature points to the recruitment of women to the national struggle in times of crisis without this being translated into improvement in women’s status, the stigmatization of women who put forward feminist ideas as anti-nationalist or anti-religious,⁸ the development of women’s movements from within political parties and their dissociation from the mainstream due to lack of support by male members, and the concentration of feminist efforts on NGO and community work.⁹ These social trends have caused feminists in many parts of the Arab Middle East as well as in Israel to focus their efforts

for change on social issues and less on women's political enfranchisement.¹⁰ The micro-level analysis of this study is meant to bring to light how the very act of women making a place for themselves in the national political arena can contest patriarchal ideas and gender power relations.

TALKING TO A FAMILIAR RESEARCHER

This paper is based on interviews with six women who were discernible at ASU events as visible political leaders on campus during the 1999–2000 academic year. The interviews are a small part of my ethnographic fieldwork in Arab student life at The Hebrew University, home to the oldest ASU, and situated in Jerusalem—both the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the seat of the Israeli parliament. Though relying on a small number of interviews, these six are a significant percentage of the total number of women leaders on campus and represent all the parties involved in the ASU that year; there were perhaps three other highly visible women leaders with whom I spoke casually. This paper focuses on interviews with the six women, relying also on my ethnographic work and interviews with other students on campus.

All the women I interviewed knew me through my presence at political activities, demonstrations, and meetings that revealed me as interested, involved, and sympathetic to Palestinian issues. They knew I lived with three Palestinian women in the dormitories and identified me as from American stock. Some knew of my past experience living in Arab villages in the North. I never hid that I am Jewish, but some assumed I am Christian until I corrected them. My daily relationships with them were carried out in a language (Arabic) and places familiar to them—the university, the Old City of Jerusalem, and political activities. I requested that the interview be conducted in Hebrew, in which I am more proficient than Arabic, and in which they too are proficient, in order to better understand. The interviews were conducted by their choosing either in their dorm rooms or mine or in a university office. Though the places and people were familiar, the language of communication changed momentarily, creating a nationally saturated situation in which they were telling me about their experience as Palestinians in a language that exemplified national power relations. All the women either reserved the right to speak Arabic if they found trouble expressing themselves or threw in Arabic phrases and asked me if I knew what they meant. It was almost as if they were checking up that I remained attached to a Palestinian view—that their story fell on sympathetic ears.

I was interested in political activism, and asked them open-ended questions about how they became involved, what roles they play, and what the activism does for them. As the women talked about activism, they continually directed me away from politics and towards issues of sexuality. They would bring up the topic, and, trying to be culturally sensitive, I would avoid probing, only to find them leading me back again. They were cooperative, and almost stubbornly insistent on talking about this. Their insistence led to my analysis of the interaction between sexuality and politics.

The gendered nature of verbs and pronouns in both Hebrew and Arabic allowed me to follow what the women were saying about and to women and men respectively. I used this as a guide for following how they spoke about political activism as gendered bodies, and it is noted in quotations. I also posed the accounts of women from different parties against each other to see how they spoke differently and similarly about sexuality in their political activities. This showed me how politics is sexualized for them all and also helped me identify the different ways political, liberal discourse is recruited to formation of strategies for negotiating politics and sexuality.

I will begin with a general background of women and Palestinian Israeli politics, the place of university politics, and a description of the women interviewed. The presentation of data and analysis is divided into two parts: how, through their political activism, the women decipher the cultural construction of sexuality and gender as an inseparable pair, and the strategies they form within political activism for subverting gender constructions.

WOMEN IN PALESTINIAN ISRAELI POLITICS

Israeli politics, for both Palestinians and Jews, bring together liberal democratic assumptions and nationalist concerns. In the struggle between the two national groups, women are positioned by the patriarchal nature of both.

On the one hand, the liberal ideal of open participation for all citizens has been shown to be most fitting to a male citizen, who is autonomous and free to make social contracts with other individuals. Feminists argue that women are not always positioned so freely and unconnected. The existence of political activities depends on retention of a home or private sphere in which the needs of families are taken care of. Women often hold greater responsibilities in this sphere, which can determine or limit their

participation in the public sphere.¹¹ Pateman claims that liberal democracy is actually a fraternal patriarchy in which women are subordinated, not to a man, but to men as a whole.¹² Women partake of it by entering into the “sexual contract” in which they give a man the rights to her body as a reproductive vehicle, a sexual object, and a source of domestic labor, in exchange for financial and domestic support, which allows them to be mothers and partial participants in the public sphere. Thus, the ideals of liberalism create an illusion of a free social order open to all, while actually reproducing gender divisions in the public and private spheres.¹³

On the other hand, nationalist ideas give additional meaning to the association of women within the domestic sphere.¹⁴ Thus Niza Berkovitz shows how a separate type of citizenship is created for Jewish women, who are allowed to contribute to the public sphere, but whose expected contribution is through motherhood.¹⁵ Similarly, Manar Hasan shows how Palestinian women are positioned as the object of struggle between Jewish and Palestinian males over the control and nature of the Palestinian community.¹⁶ Both Zionist settlement and Israel’s independence from the British were steps in importing western populations and liberal models of government and social ideas into the state. Absorption of the Palestinians remaining after the 1948 War and of Jewish immigrants from Europe, the Maghreb, and the Middle East has been guided by western liberal ideologies and reforms. Palestinian Israelis have continued to struggle with Zionism, simultaneously for preservation of “authentic” Arab (traditional, urban, high, and low class) models of society and for empowered positions within the modern Israeli state and society. Palestinian women in Israel get caught in the middle. Early encouragement of *hamula* (extended family) political organization in the Arab sector fostered the perpetuation of patriarchal leadership and male domination of the public sphere.¹⁷ In the private sphere, state “cultural sensitivity” has led to deferral to *Sharia* (Islamic Law) courts and/or tradition in matters of personal status and family honor killings, restricting Palestinian women to the whims of cultural patriarchal decisions about sexuality, freedom of movement, and marriage.¹⁸ These decisions are based on the conception of women as unable to control their own sexuality and thus in need of men’s superior morality to control and govern them and the community as a whole.¹⁹ This *patriarchal politics*, as Hasan calls it is, on the one hand, the fruit of state policies of pseudo-cultural sensitivity towards the Palestinian population that reproduces an image of the Palestinian community as traditional and religious, and on the other hand, the fruit of the desire of Palestinian men to preserve an image of authenticity and autonomy from Jews. It preserves

the power of patriarchal assumptions inherent to both liberal democracy and traditionalist Arab culture often associated with Islam.

Palestinian Israeli political leaders have made their way to leadership through a combination of higher education and university politics. Higher education is perceived by the Palestinian community in Israel as the main venue for self and collective empowerment—as a venue for individual economic and status enhancement and as collective means for entry into the public sphere and attainment of the skills required to struggle within it.²⁰ Ironically, it is in the university, a self-professed liberal, meritocratic institution, that Palestinian Israeli students' awareness of their secondary citizen status is heightened. As they compare themselves to their Jewish peers, differences in pre-university education are evident, and a past of discrimination is concretized as they experience the fruits of educationally inferior preparatory schools.²¹

Arab student politics nurture the experience of and awareness to ethno-nationally based discrimination.²² The ASU is an officially unrecognized student group comprised of sub-groups connected to the major Arab political parties. It is allowed to conduct activities on campus, but cites the university's denial to recognize it alongside the Student Union, as proof of state discriminatory policies towards Palestinian citizens. The ASU keeps in close contact with all Arab students, delivering to their dorm rooms information sheets on the political situation, newspapers, posters with national slogans and pictures, and notices of activities. Activities usually consist of a lecture by a (male) politician and a cultural performance (musicians, theatrical groups, stand-up comedians, films) of national character.

Historically, women have been distanced from both parts of this combination—both by their low rates of participation in higher education and their primarily participatory (as opposed to activist) role in university politics. Initially, women were not included as participants in the national aim for higher education. They gained a foothold into the door of higher education first as a continuation of their association with the home, by becoming elementary teachers, needed as the State enacted compulsory education, and by the early 1990s had expanded into other disciplines of higher education almost equally with Palestinian men.²³ While women today make up about half of the audience of ASU events, only a small number participate as student politicians.

During the 1999–2000 school year, prior to the outbreak of the second Intifada, the ASU consisted of three political parties: Jabha (the Front for Democracy and Equality), Ihtihaluf (the Independents), and Tajamu (the

Democratic National Alliance). The platform of Jabha, the oldest party with the most mandates, advocates communism and co-existence between Jews and Arabs. On the national level it consists of both Jews and Arabs; the university group is purely Arab. Tajamu is a highly nationalist, secular party. It is very popular among higher education graduates. Ihtihaluf is independent, in that it is not officially affiliated with any political party in the Knesset. Unofficially, its leadership is identical to that of Il-Risali, a “non-political” religious social group. Of the women interviewed, Tagreed (all pseudonyms) was active with Jabha, Sabah and Nawal with Il-Risali, and Howla, Shifa, and Feiroz with Tajamu. Sabah and Nawal identified with Il-Risali not Ihtihaluf.

Tagreed was mainly visible at demonstrations where she shouts slogans and talks with the media. At other events she helped behind the scenes, passing messages between other members of the party and taking photographs. Sabah organized a bi-weekly Koran Study for women and Nawal often led it, notifying about future events and collecting donations for Palestinian refugees. Howla was the most “famous” female Palestinian politician on campus; she introduced events and “manned” information booths in the central university square. Feiroz sometimes accompanied her, and also passed out information door-to-door in the dorms, talking with women and encouraging them to participate in Tajamu activities. Shifa was highly active in inner-party meetings—bringing information, planning events, and reporting progress. She was always on the frontlines of demonstrations, shouting and waving signs.

Participating in an awareness of political oppression and action for liberation, these women were exposed to new ideas about society and change, and also to the patriarchy of both liberal and traditionalist discourses regarding the position of Arab women in politics and in Palestinian and Israeli society. It is interesting to see how these women relate to and use assumptions from both these discourses to create new models of women from within patriarchal politics. First, I turn to how they decipher the social construction and ties between sexuality and gender from within their experience as activists, and then to their strategies for ensuring a place for themselves as active women in a male arena.

DECIPHERING THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER AS A PAIR

The foundation of the political experience for all women regardless of party affiliation was an embodied experience of cultural expectations regarding their behavior as women. Campus activism puts these women in the public eye, catapulting them into the center of the strictest expectations of sexuality. As they experienced their activism being judged not only by their political contribution but also by whether it is in line with expectations of proper female behavior, they uncovered the socio-sexual arrangement of society. By picking apart conceptions of femininity and masculinity, as well as how these are constructed in the national struggle, the women deciphered sexuality as culturally constructed and as inextricably linked with gender relations. I begin by looking at how politics presents sexuality as constructed, and then move to the women's deconstructions of femininity, masculinity, and political patriarchy.

SEEING SEXUALITY IN POLITICS

Even as we listen to women who come to different conclusions about how to navigate sexuality and politics, we can hear them using the political field to decipher social relations as based in expectations of male and female sexuality.

Sabah explained that she got involved with the Islamic party *Il-Risali* to help others, because "during my first year I saw that women and men would do a lot of things I didn't approve of—smoke cigarettes and sit together." According to Islamic standards, both smoking and sitting together pose a threat to women's sexual honor. Sitting together encompasses the danger of close physical contact, and smoking, a selfish, bodily act, even perhaps hinting at sexual pleasure, displays immodesty and even disobedience. Political divisions illuminated for her that different types of social arrangements are based on ideas about gender relations and what is considered a public display of sexuality. For Sabah, the politics of religious activism is an arena in which she can find and widen a sexually safe and comfortable gendered social order.

Tagreed sees politics as the opposite. Speaking about other Palestinian students' disapproval of her vocal involvement, she said:

I looked at it [my activism] as that I am trying to overcome the social barriers that put women in one place and that they don't want her to get out of. People simply saw it as an attempt to take up western behavior. And people just don't like people who are different.

She explains their disapproval as based on her stepping out of traditional gender boundaries through behaving western. That western behavior is equated with inappropriate gendered behavior, hints at the existence of a social discourse prevalent in many Arab populations—that modest Arab women are a symbol of an 'authentic' Arab moral superiority against western women's immodesty and loose, uncontrolled sexuality.²⁴ Her own explanation of her political activism turns this around, and makes activism part of the struggle against gendered barriers. Even when she herself does not articulate the role of images of eastern and western women's sexuality, her political activism gives her bodily experience of how women's sexuality is recruited to the struggle between east and west, an important part of the Palestinian national struggle in Israel.

Feiroz learns how constructions of sexuality restrict women's social involvement by restricting women's bodies in public spaces and relates to this explicitly. She felt her sexuality was made a public issue due to her activism, and brought this private understanding to the public space of the party. A Muslim from Nazareth, the biggest Arab city in Israel and a more cosmopolitan area than Arab villages, she explained that she does not wear mini-skirts or stay out late at the university because of her political affiliation. People criticize how she dresses, acts, talks, and even that she is from Nazareth, where girls have an image of being "whores" because of the urban freedom they enjoy. When I suggested that this stereotype is not connected to her political activity, she argued:

Yeah, but in the end that [image] affects it, believe me. When I am a [political] candidate there is a limit to how much I can influence people. Someone from the Muthallath [an all Muslim region], he won't vote for me. In politics you have so many things you have to take into consideration. It isn't how strong you (female) are, or how much you (female) understand, or how much you (female) know. It is always a lot of other things. How you (female) look.

In her argument she elaborates the different criteria for the political success of women and men. Whereas men are judged for their self-confidence,

intelligence, and political knowledge, these are irrelevant for women's success. Body image and reputation determine her success. Her political visibility brings her up against standards of a wider and more traditional Palestinian community than she experienced at home. When a woman is publicly visible, she has to live up to the most traditional ideal type. As she enters the political scene, her sexuality (the way she controls and/or gives in to bodily pleasures) is more highly surveyed and her visibility makes her a point of honor of the entire collective, so she is expected to act accordingly. Whether or not she agrees with the standards, her political involvement in the party is predicated on personal alteration to fit the standards.

Politics not only makes felt the sexual basis of society and the contingency of gender expectations on sexuality, but also is the raw material for deciphering their cultural construction. Let's listen to the women articulate aspects of constructed sexuality that they upset by being active.

THEY THINK THAT I WILL THREATEN
THEIR MASCULINE FEELING—
INTIMIDATING ARAB MASCULINITY

Howla deconstructs masculinity as positioning women as objects for men's desires. She decipheres masculinity as a social foundation that, albeit changeable, colors her activism with gendered implications. Howla, a third-year-student considered attractive by her peers, has already advanced onto the national party list. She spoke repeatedly of how young men are not interested in her romantically:

I analyze it this way: boys, especially Arabs don't *think* about women. They *look* for them, for a style. They don't come [to me]. They think I am difficult, too strong. They think that I will threaten their masculine feeling. That I am a little strong. I don't give in to them. I understand why they are like this. I need to change the masculine ideas of the whole society, their chauvinism. So it's a little difficult. They look from afar. They don't come. Not at all.

Howla interprets men's romantic rejection of her as based in social construction of gender and sexuality. Men look and consider, while women are supposed to be looked at. In other words, women are the object and men the subject when it comes to romantic relations permissive of active sexuality. The male subjective gaze is rational to varying degrees. Her activism is threatening because it does not conform to the ideal of an obedient

woman, and may have implications in relations between the sexes. Even from an empowering political position, she understands herself as under the masculine gaze—viewed as a sexual creature, but threatening to take up masculine roles of understanding and organizing the social order. Deciphering this image as drawn and preserved through the patriarchal arrangement of sexuality—“the masculine ideas of society”—she seeks to control and change the patriarchal dichotomy not only of sexual object/subject but also within wider gendered roles.

RUINING THE IMAGE— THREATENING ARAB FEMININITY

The model of a strong, opinionated woman upsets popular images of Arab femininity as well as masculinity. This subject came up often throughout my fieldwork. Because women activists are well-known on campus, their lives are scrutinized. Sitting in the cafeteria or walking in the halls, other Palestinian students watch them and pass judgment. For political women, responses by non-political women clarify women’s involvement in the gendered arrangement of society.

On the one hand, the women themselves feel and take pride in their fame. Howla bragged that she is well-known even on other campuses, because of her novelty as a female politician. Feiroz boasted that she is regularly introduced as “Feiroz from Tajamu,” and Shifa related that she is known as the “address” for her party. But Howla, Tagreed, and Shifa also all felt that other women give them a hard time for their activism. Support is given from afar or alongside critical “questioning” of how they manage to balance political involvement and academic duties. In presenting this criticism, the political women speak for the “average” Palestinian woman, describing the normative view of a Palestinian woman. In contrast to themselves, they present her as submissive, succeeding, and concentrating on academics and not causing a stir in other areas.

Tagreed constructs these women as her Other, creating a new definition for herself. She prefers the company of males because she can talk politics or about books. With women, she complained, she tires of endless gossip and petty conversation about her last menstrual period.

I always feel that [preference to sit with men], and the girls aren’t willing to accept that. It ruins the image for them, because when a guy sees a girl like me, he starts to question the treatment he gets from other girls.

Like Howla, she crosses the masculine/feminine border, but sees herself upsetting the image of femininity rather than masculinity. Her free presence with men replaces the ideal of the attractive, modest but potentially sexual woman with woman as smart and intellectually engaging—woman not as sexual object, but intellectual partner. Through her interpretation of other women's reactions to her, she understands she can destroy the sexual mystique of femininity and create a female image based on intellect rather than sexual mystery.

A THREAT TO NEO-PATRIARCHY

Using the term “sector” which is used to describe the political national organization of Israeli society into the “Jewish and Arab sectors,” Shifa deciphers how sexuality is woven into this division.

[Jewish Israelis] always call us Arabs “the virginity sector,” and that is a very hurtful thing. Because all they know is that she is a virgin, and that is not right at all . . . What do they care about what I do? I do [sexual acts] for me and not for [her sexual partner] and not for my Dad. I do it for me. Because of that [it bothers me that the Jews think of Arabs as the virginity sector]. It [my right to lose my virginity] is more of a slogan than a practice.

Criticizing what she sees as the Jewish reduction of all Arab society to sexually controlled, non-liberated women, who have no other attributes aside from their sexuality, she expresses anger at Jewish Israeli society's reduction of the Arab sector to a traditional woman. This image of Arab women as devoid of agency in love, submissive, and dominated by Arab males, is a common western conception critiqued as a construction that serves to justify western claims to liberality and moral superiority over the east.²⁵ Equating Arabs with controlled virginity, Shifa criticizes the Israeli view of Palestinians as feminine, passive, and controlled. As she continues, she switches the object of her argument to Arab men, insisting on her own prerogative to regulate her sexual activity. Simultaneously, she reserves respect for the Arab framework, apologizing that claiming personal sexual prerogative is more of a protest to Jewish society. By placing these arguments side-by-side, she adopts a stance similar to Arab feminists elsewhere who simultaneously fight the western images of Arabs and the lack of women's rights in parts of the Arab world.²⁶ Shifa paints her sexual project as a political affront to the patriarchal conspiracy of Arab and Jewish men.

All these women decipher sexuality as both constructed and a salient organizing foundation of gendered social relations. They feel the binds of sexuality in an arena supposedly based on rights and equality. This experience of a permanent gaze on their sexuality teaches them both the power of sexuality and their power to disrupt it. The choices they make about asserting themselves and their bodies in the political sphere can be read as their *strategies* for navigating, contesting, and preserving patriarchy.

EMPLOYING SEXUALIZED STRATEGIES IN SUBVERTING PATRIARCHY

A woman's choices about voice, body spaces, and dress are *sexualized strategies* for negotiating gendered power relations, because they work on and against social ideas of propriety for presenting and asserting the body in public.²⁷ From their presentation of themselves, I gleaned four strategies the women put into practice. Each woman is represented through the dominant strategy she employed, although they each vacillate among the strategies to various degrees in their politicized personal lives.

“UNTIL I HAD UNDERSTOOD MY RELIGION EXACTLY”— INTELLECTUALIZING FEMININE SEXUALITY

Nawal describes her home as politically active, traditional but non-religious. Her father, the local head of the mainstream Zionist Labor party (in which Arabs have been members since 1970) encouraged her to participate in Labor youth events during high school, but she never became a leader. She chose Il-Risali from the other political groups, because

I don't feel that . . . part of what they say is right and part not . . . [The other parties] have values I can't accept. When for example, they have parties—I don't go to parties, so I didn't go. For example in planning—in our meetings we keep certain limits on women. There are types of people who I can't sit with, because of maybe an 'openness' that I can't stand . . . I can't sit with male students unless there is like with us [Il-Risali] a certain amount of division.

Il-Risali is entirely Arab and Islamic, unlike Labor events and other student political parties, which may be Arab but are tinged with western, Jewish characteristics. It replicates an ideal of Arab patriarchal society she

holds. Her strategy is tied to her choice of party. Typical of women active in Islamic organizations is the need to reject the west and its freedoms as oppressive and objectifying of women.²⁸ Opposed to the sexual looseness of people's "openness" in other political parties or to threats to her chastity at late night parties, Il-Risali is pure and protective. By keeping feminine and masculine divisions in order, sexuality is kept in check. Nawal can avoid affronts to her honor or the possibility that she may over step these bounds.

By focusing their activism on women's groups and behind the scenes organizing, Nawal and other Il-Risali women like Sabah seem to replicate gender divisions based on conceptions of sexuality. Indeed similar patterns of women's activism among women can be seen in other parts of the Arab world and are usually an extension of women's private and reproductive roles.²⁹ While indeed these women do reproduce a gender division between men and women, I argue that they also challenge its basis in ideas about women-as-biological/sexual and men-as-rational/moral. Comparing herself to the men on the cadre, Nawal says:

Sometimes I feel like they have more power than I do. Sometimes they make decisions, as if they come from the whole leadership, but you know what? I hate when they do that, but they're *men*—really! . . . As a female leader, I can't . . . decide something without telling him. If I want to invite someone [to lecture] I can't. I don't know people outside . . . Even if I want to invite a woman I have to ask them, because everything that is outside of the university we don't have connections . . . I tell you our society is a patriarchal society—has been and always will be. As long as we are just women then I feel more of a leader. When it is general society I feel very weak.

Nawal expresses a clear understanding and dissatisfaction with division between the sexes. As long as sexual division is directly related to the possibility of unwanted physical/sexual contact, it is acceptable. The moment it relates to personal competency, it frustrates her. Frustration at the sexual basis of society brings her to liberal claims for equality through Islam. She uses religious knowledge to challenge sexual-based divisions by developing her power as an individual and a leader.

Nawal paints her adoption of the trappings of this sexual division (prayer, modesty, religious dress) as an active, rational act. She spoke of participating as a leader without covering her head until she felt ready in her last months at university, just before she returned to her village:

I decided to keep my way of dress, because a lot of times people get into religion within a month or two—maximum a year. They take up all the trappings of the religion including dress. I took four years, until I had understood my religion exactly, until I found my voice and felt strong. Even though today in my society they don't accept that. I gathered strength, I have a million and one things to tell them. I can't say it in one sentence. I have a lot of answers.

One could argue that Nawal knew that to be accepted as a religious woman in her home village and to marry a religious man, she must play the part entirely. Veiling would give her access to a respectable position in society. Yet she paints this decision as a free choice—an indication of a freedom to determine her place. She changes the meaning of the practice of veiling into a political claiming of self. For her, it is not a practice based on conceptions of sexuality, but a sign of a rational decision and a chosen position in society.

She explains covering her head not in obedience to cultural demands, but as a result of rational examination of the religious canon. This relationship and study of the canon is in and of itself a masculine act, which she recruits in order to strengthen herself socially. So while she takes up the trappings of feminine sexuality, she does so through a masculine process. By donning the head covering she becomes more obedient and acceptable in the eyes of society, and by painting her choice as a rational individual decision, she strengthens her feeling of autonomy. What is important is that Nawal's empowerment is not only in religious terms of a heightened connection to God, but also in terms of the gender-blind western discourse of individualism.³⁰ On the surface, she preserves the social order but changes her power within it by integrating the discourses.

A HOUSE AND MARRIAGE SO I CAN CONTINUE IN POLITICS—CASHING IN PATRIARCHAL ASSETS

Against Nawal's tentative leadership among women only, Howla seems to be of another world. The head of Tajamu for two years, she became a member of the National ASU and advanced to the national party list. Yet, the two women seem to share acceptance of traditional socio-sexual divisions, at least in certain spheres.

The respect Howla received for her activism once satisfied her so much that she thought of nothing else. Now she wants more of a “personal life” so she can prepare for her future:

All the regular things that everyone else wants—a house. I want basic work, not just politics because sometimes that isn't your work. Like everyone else, I want to start to get my life in order. It doesn't work like this. I used to only think about politics . . . This is the time to be in touch with someone . . . for the future. I don't believe in just fun. For a known end, a house and marriage so I can continue in politics. I don't know if I will stay here or if I will go back to the village, so if I have a house, if I have my own life, I can organize it.

Howla's strategy is to act the part expected of her in the traditional text, cashing in on the advantages it gives her. For Arab women and feminists, the need to reinforce that they are not neglecting their role in the family is often a prerequisite for forging a space for public activism,³¹ but we can see how this strategy also relies on the liberal text. One advantage is that it allows her to enjoy her right, according to the liberal text, to continue to be politically active. Just as many women veil to be less threatening and move more freely in traditionally male spaces, she adopts what I call the “liberal veil.” Adopting the normative gender trappings of a progressive career-mother, she enters into the sexual contract, but benefits twice over: she is respected in the traditional sense of family honor and also for her political contribution to the nation. The second contribution however, is predicated on achievement of the first. Her performance of a traditional sexuality is pragmatic - crucial to her continued participation in politics.

I will need to give up on some things. Arab young men are very “oriental.” We haven't yet reached the stage where they won't feel I am threatening them if I go to meetings all over. I am not a teacher or a social worker or a bank teller. That's what they want. I will need to give up. I don't want to but if I don't then I won't have anything.

Replicating the orient/occident dichotomy of national struggles between the Arab and western world, she sees oriental tradition as foolishly patriarchal and believes in the ideal of liberation. She understands her movement and going “to meetings all over” (her unsupervised sexuality) as threatening “oriental” traditionalism. By marrying, she institutionalizes her sexuality, granting her more freedom to have her own life and not give

up political activity. Her strategy is to relent to acting the part expected of, as she puts it, an “oriental” woman, in order to earn the ability to challenge it in other ways. In playing along, she may pay homage to tradition, but she also manipulates it to advance ideas of liberation, which she favors.

YOU CAN'T MIX YOUR PERSONAL LIFE WITH YOUR POLITICAL LIFE—ESCAPING THE PUBLIC EYE

Feiroz, in contrast to Nawal and Howla who keep up appearances of obedience, whittles out a place in which to escape the demand to do so. She separates between the political and the private—answering to the demands of society in the political realm and exerting an “unacceptable” sexuality in the private realm. The constant danger that her audiences will meet, brings her to conclusions about the limits of the power of this practice to step out of the bounds of patriarchy.

Feiroz has had several boyfriends, yet she tries not to let this be known:

In the university it isn't good to deal with boys a lot.

{Because of politics or in general?}

Because of politics! If they [other Palestinian students] see you everyday with someone else, then it isn't nice. If they see you everyday or every month with a boyfriend—or even every half a year. If I have three boyfriends each year, then it's not good. [They will think] that you aren't stable—that you can't decide what you want. So you can't mix your personal life with your political life.

A plethora of boyfriends is more than an indication of being loose; it reflects deeply on character. In the public eye, a well-thought out choice of partner is the legitimate articulation of sexuality. Articulations of desire or pleasure are not condoned. Having multiple partners is read as failure to control sexuality and to think things through. To avoid this label, Feiroz makes the separation—guarding the space of her private life from the eyes of her constituents. She performs the “good girl” in public and does as she pleases in private.

Like Howla, she separates between the private and public spheres. Yet, if Howla reveals appropriate appearances to gain support for the new gender conceptions she acts out in the political arena, Feiroz puts forth acceptable appearances in public in order to safeguard her private space as an arena in which to perform new concepts of sexuality. Only as long

as the twain do not meet can she continue to act outside the bounds of patriarchal power.

Feiroz can allow herself private indulgences because she limits the extent of the public gaze. “I don’t give up on a lot of things, because I don’t want to go far, to be number one on the list.” The risk of getting “caught” can be taken only if the arm of politics is weakened by rejecting personal advancement. She takes herself out of the public gaze, and so mitigates the importance of her image in it.

OUT WITH THE BOYS—MASCULATION

Shifa and Tagreed’s strategy is a sort of passing or performing “masculinely.” They manage their belonging in the party by befriending men on male terms. In this gender crossing-over lies a potential to de-sexualize themselves, to gain acceptance by discarding their femininity.³² Yet neither of them does so entirely; their power to challenge the socio-sexual order lies in the confusion they create.

Tagreed’s external appearance in her first year at university was so masculine, that I mistook her for a boy the first time I saw her at a demonstration. Her skinny legs protruded from baggy shorts that almost no Arab woman dares to wear, her hair was gathered up in a baseball cap, and glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. She looked like a first year male, uncomfortable in a still pubescent body. But as she bellowed at the security guards “I pay 100% tuition—let me back in the university,” she used feminine verbs and her small breasts graced her t-shirt from within.

A year later when I interviewed her, she came dressed in tight jeans that accented female curves and light blue short-sleeved sweater, with her hair down in ringlets around her face, but still lugging a hefty black briefcase against her slight frame. She spoke in parallel about her political involvement and her transition in appearance. As a child, she dressed and acted like a boy. At the university, she received positive feedback from some students for her loud voice and fighting stance at demonstrations. Others made comments “like ‘calm down’ or ‘look how she acts like a boy’” and gave her looks that she felt conveyed “put yourself in the mold of a girl.” As she took up a more feminine appearance, she experienced the power and limitations to performing masculinity as a young woman in Palestinian Israeli society.

Of discarding the male exterior she had performed since childhood, she said:

People were simply shocked . . . I got my hair cut, changed my dress, my behavior . . . I looked more gentle. People simply didn't get what was happening there. It was harder for them to accept Tagreed the girl, the woman in that status . . . Sometimes it hurts. That is simply the price of being me.

When she dresses as a woman, she is expected to act like one. The critical comments did not disappear, but rather were reformulated. Whereas as a boy, she could partially escape control of female sexuality, as a woman she feels it in full force. Unlike Feiroz and Howla, she takes the control head on and suffers the consequences.

At first glance, her transformation recreates the masculine/feminine dichotomy. She then challenges it by not acting out the expectations attached to her gender appearance. Relating how she felt about the reactions of her peers, she said, "At first it was strange and then it was empowering." The shock is empowering as she realizes that she is creating waves of change. She realizes her power and its limitations in manipulating society through her own presentations.

Drawing a dichotomy between boys and girls, Shifa aligns herself with boys:

I always hear that they [the boys] give me respect that I [work hard for the party] for them and they see that. I don't know. I really don't understand that. How is it that the boys see that there is female leadership that fights more and more and the girls don't? . . . There is more friendship [with the boys]. Because for instance I can go to a certain pub with the boys, drink and have fun, and that makes us closer. They can come here and bring the *nargilah* [water pipe] and we will smoke together, drink beer. And the girls are not into that at all. I can go with them to the city and buy clothes, but that's not my thing at all . . . But what I like to do is go out with the boys and not the girls.

Shifa looks at society from a male viewpoint and demands to be allowed to act like them. She rejects almost all things feminine, painting a dichotomy between herself, the sexually liberated, politically powerful woman, and the obedient, unenlightened girl. Fine and Macpherson found a similar trend among adolescent American girls. Pitting themselves as the opposite of "good" girls, these girls seemed to replicate "terms of respect for the authority of men as superior and normal forms of human beings."³³ Yet doing so, they also demanded their right to "be" young men.

Perhaps as in other cases of national struggle, Shifa gives precedent to working like the men on national politics, ignoring feminist issues.³⁴ Yet Shifa's 'being male' has consequences for the gendered order. By drinking and smoking and going out late at night, Shifa both indulges in "masculine" pleasures and puts her honor in a precarious position where she is responsible for controlling and supervising it. At the same time, she works for the honor and respect that comes from contributing to the nation. Seeing the advantages attached to male sexuality in the social order, she chooses to perform like them—to claim her right to be the boss of her own sexuality and not to allow control of it by others to hinder her access to the resources of political power.

WOMEN REPOSITIONED IN LIBERAL AND TRADITIONALIST PATRIARCHY

Politically active women are publicly visible. Even if they are not the norm, their actions get read by themselves and by others in terms of social norms. That they brought up norms of sexuality in talking about their political activism is not surprising. The issue of sexuality came up throughout all my fieldwork with both politically active and non-active women. Yet non-active women spoke excitedly of staying out late, "being in connection" with someone, and having men visit them in their rooms, while political women spoke with much more social awareness. For the political woman, public visibility, close interactions and connections with male colleagues, her bodily presence in public space, the ever-present judgment of her peers, and her role as a representative of the collective brought her directly up against the sexual basis of the gendered organization of society. Accentuation of the social meaning of sexuality forced them to deal with the issue more reflectively. As the political women forge their way into politics, they connect themselves with the public discourse and decision-making, by which the sexual nature of society is preserved and replicated. To survive and continue to be active politically, they must employ a wide variety of sexualized strategies. By employing these strategies within and while being active in politics they contest the sexual basis of the gendered social order.

In creating these strategies, the women's speech is flavored both by their experience of Arab patriarchy and their knowledge of the western liberal text, and the same language is used to speak about sexuality and politics. In their narrations, politics is an arena of sexual surveillance and

their sexuality is a political matter of rights, independence, and struggle. As politics and sexuality inform experience of each other, the women's political activism itself challenges both traditionalist Arab and liberal divisions of male/female social spheres, as well as the sexual basis of Palestinian Israeli society. They surpass the traditionalist Arab configuration of woman as a passive vessel of potentially explosive sexuality to be controlled by men, the liberal configuration of a woman as attached to the public through her supportive association with the private, and the patriarchal political image of Arab women as unable to advocate on their own behalf.

Their strategies reflect a newly formed contextualized type of struggle against patriarchy. The women use the power invested in sexuality by Palestinian patriarchal politics to fight it at its roots. As they re-perform sexuality, they determine the extent and manner in which it can be used as a resource for the advancement of social equality. Nawal challenges the idea of a contract; a women's sexuality cannot just be exchanged between men, but must be given over through intellectual process. Howla exchanges her sexuality for the right to participate as a desexualized actor in the political sphere. Feiroz takes her sexuality onto the "black market," performing it actively. Shifa and Tagreed perform their sexuality "masculinely," publicly claiming equal entrance to the sexual contract. They all appropriate their sexuality as personal property and a resource for exchange. They both use liberal ideal to change the traditionally fixed division between the genders and use the power patriarchal politics invests in sexuality to change the modern sexual contract.

Recruiting sexuality to amend the inequality of the sexual contract creates a new discourse within which women can conceive a variety of new strategies to identify themselves as political women and to change the position of women in patriarchal politics.

NOTES

I would like to thank Tamar Rapoport, Tamar Elor, Pnina Motzafi-Haller, Fatima Sadiqi, and four anonymous reviewers for their comments on drafts of this article. A version of this paper was presented at the Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence, Italy, 2001. Research and preparation of this paper were made possible by support from the School of Education, the Lafer Center for Women and Gender Studies, and the Truman Institute at The Hebrew University, as well as by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.

1. By this term I am referring to the Palestinian Arab citizens of the State of Israel, often referred to as Israeli Arabs. I have chosen "Palestinian Israeli" because it acknowledges at once both the complexity and the conflicts inherent in the women's subjective existence. For a further discussion of the civil and national aspects of identity see Sammy Smooha, *The Orientation and Politicization of the Arab Minority in Israel* (Haifa, 1980), Nadim Rouhana, *Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict* (New Haven, 1997); Ramzi Suleiman and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, "National and Civic Identities of Palestinians in Israel," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 137(2) (1997) 219–228.

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