

# LONELY IN YOUR FIRM GRIP: WOMEN IN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN FAMILIES

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Recent feminist literature on Arab women has emphasized their agency and strategizing capabilities. In particular, researchers have highlighted women's skilled utilization of their blood rights for protection and lifelong support within the patriarchal group. I take issue with this generalization, using ethnographic material on Palestinians inside Israel. I argue that women's entitlement to protection is more limited than is usually assumed. An analysis of the code of familial commitment, particularly the interplay between gender and power, reveals that in order to obtain their family's commitment, Israeli-Palestinian women need to maintain a delicate balance between power and weakness. For a variety of reasons, women often fail to achieve such balance and hence suffer isolation and loneliness.

Your husband loves you when you are rich  
Your parents love you when you are strong<sup>1</sup>

The official ideology of the Palestinian family envisions the relationships within the patrilineal group as those of cohesion, solidarity, and mutual commitment,<sup>2</sup> and ignores the possibility of loneliness within it. By and large, men and women alike tend to embrace this official depiction of the family and to accept the idea that they should put the good of their family group first. Yet for women, this familial grip often yields an outcome quite the opposite of support and assurance. This is most obvious in the case of women who endure domestic violence but avoid seeking help outside the home, lest they damage their family reputation.<sup>3</sup> Mostly women find that they are on their own in times of crisis with their husband and children, when facing financial difficulties, or when making important decisions. For them, the family as ideology is significantly separate from the family as experience. While the former is collectivist and connotes empathy, support, and togetherness, the latter is frequently individualistic and connotes isolation, loneliness, and even threat. This experience, which is not infrequent among women inside Israeli-Palestinian families, is my focus here. I start with some working definitions.

Loneliness is a broad concept with a range of meanings, positive and negative. For example, Winnicott (1958) considered the capacity to be alone as a positive, in fact an essential, component of balanced emotional maturity. Moustakas (1961) defined loneliness as the most genuine existential condition and a vital source of creativity, love, and self-acceptance. Likewise, various cultures positively sanction periodical solitude, as in the case of Prophet Muhammad

receiving the revelation of the Koran during voluntary isolation. At the same time, other aspects of loneliness, such as 'real loneliness', to borrow Fromm-Reichmann's (1959: 327) expression,<sup>4</sup> are harsh and mentally destructive. When I told my friend Eyād that I was thinking of writing about the loneliness of people in Palestinian families, he said: 'This is so painfully true! People are very lonely in families. I can talk about myself, but also about every other person I know. And I know! I keep watching, spying on people, and I see how they all suffer from the same thing that I suffer from'. For Eyād loneliness connoted mainly the inability to get intimate – hug, touch, kiss, and cry openly – with the people he loved most, especially his mother.

In the present context, I leave aside the longing-for-intimacy aspect of loneliness and concentrate on its relational aspects, namely isolation and failed familial fidelity.<sup>5</sup> Let me exemplify what I mean by this distinction. In Israeli-Palestinian culture, men, too, may feel lonely, as did Eyād, who felt that normative behaviour prevented him from becoming intimate with his loved ones. Yet regardless of the question of emotional closeness, men enjoy nearly unconditional familial fidelity. Israeli-Palestinian men can always count on family members for instrumental support and hardly ever face violent punishments such as desertion or ostracism.<sup>6</sup> The women's lot, in this respect, tends to be very different. For women, familial fidelity and solidarity are very much conditional attributes and, moreover, they are packaged as a double standard. Women are expected to remain faithful to their families at all costs and under all circumstances, but unlike the case of men, this is not necessarily a two-way obligation. As a result, Israeli-Palestinian women are susceptible to isolation and failed familial fidelity.

The literature on Arab and Middle Eastern women includes examples to the contrary. Anthropologists have documented intensive networks of mutual help among female relatives, as well as cases in which women successfully test their brothers' and fathers' commitment to back them up in times of marital distress (e.g. Holmes-Eber 1997; Lewando-Hundt 1984; Michael 1997; Rosenfeld 1960). Both forms of familial support are found among Israeli Palestinians, too. What the literature has not documented, however, are the many cases in which the norm of support and protection of women is not implemented. In my observations, far from being chance exceptions, isolation and emotional desertion of women in the midst of what otherwise seems like well-functioning extended families are not rare.

I will present some ethnographic examples of the kinds of loneliness that women experience when leading what may seem a 'perfectly ordinary life', to borrow Hager's (2000) apt expression. These women greatly differ demographically, which suggests that the phenomenon at hand is neither class-specific nor a simple reaction to economic destitution or the anomie that presumably follow urbanization or similar changes. At the same time, many Israeli-Palestinian women *do not* suffer from failed familial fidelity, which suggests that some other variables must be in operation. One such variable, I will argue, is the interaction between gender and power. Gender, as a positional identity, is defined with relation to power. Since the granting or withholding of group support bears on the personal power of its members, the chance that a woman will enjoy familial fidelity is related to her position along a continuum between power and weakness, and between masculinity and femininity.

*Four cases of failed familial fidelity*<sup>7</sup>

A. In'ām is a 40-year-old Christian woman from a village in Galilee. She is a high-school graduate and a self-employed fashion designer. Throughout the twenty years of her marriage she has been subjected to daily mental abuse and sporadic physical violence by her husband. She says, 'I've experienced violence every day of my life'. On several occasions she resolved to leave her husband. She would leave for a short while and stay with her parents, but would eventually return. During her stay at her parents', her mother would make her feel extremely uncomfortable, humiliate her, and even beat her, to compel her to go back to her husband.<sup>8</sup>

For most of her married life, In'ām has been the sole provider for her household. Her earnings pay for food and utilities, for her children's education through university, and their significant medical expenses (two of her four children suffer disabilities), for the family's social expenses (such as wedding presents and other ritualistic gifts), for her husband's working materials and pocket money, and to cover his recurrent debts. Even when her situation becomes extremely difficult, In'ām never turns to her parents and brothers for financial support, as her brothers do when they are in trouble. Not only that, she makes a point of being generous precisely to those who, by traditional law, are supposed to be her benevolent protectors, namely her brothers.

Her generosity has not paid off. In fact, one of her brothers has himself attacked her. Like her own husband, this brother has been unemployed for an extended period and lived off his wife's earnings. In times of acute distress this brother expected In'ām to give him cash and gifts similar to the ones he has been receiving from his parents and unmarried brother. While she had given him such presents in the past, she stopped doing so when her husband's creditors started sequestering their home appliances and started proceedings against the house itself. This period, in which both her and her brother's nuclear families were undergoing extreme hardship, brought their relationship to its nadir. As he grew increasingly frustrated and insecure, the brother started spreading word to their parents and relatives about In'ām's alleged immoral behaviour. Utilizing the theme of the brother's honour, he would throw tantrums and, calling her a whore before his parents, threaten to become physically violent. Abusing his knowledge about her husband's endemic distrust of her, the brother practically prevented the familial support that In'ām might have hoped to fall back on. Admittedly, In'ām has another brother, who has never joined in this active accusation, but neither has he ever defended her from their brother or her husband, or pressed their parents to take a more active stand on these matters. Around that time, In'ām stopped sharing her grievances with her siblings and parents, knowing that they were not going to do anything helpful; her aim was at least to prevent their inaction from turning into alienation.

B. Nabīha is a 40-year-old unmarried Muslim woman from an urban community. Although she had nearly nine years of schooling, she is practically illiterate and her ability to express herself verbally is rather limited. As she herself put it, 'Since my late mother passed away, five years ago, I have had no one to talk to and have lost my conversation skills. Likewise, my sister has paid people to put a spell (*amal*) on me and it has caused me to forget how to

read and write'. Nabīha lives with her father and two drug-addicted brothers in a run-down apartment in a poor neighbourhood. They live off the father's meagre earnings as a daily labourer – he stands at the market, offering his carrying services to the merchants and customers – and off Nabīha's disability pension, which started after she had a work accident. Her brothers are not officially employed, and when they are not in jail they engage in petty larceny to finance their drug habit. Besides the aforementioned sister, a divorcee who lives in a separate unit adjacent to the father's house, Nabīha has some married sisters, but she sees them seldom. In her neighbourhood she has very few acquaintances and no friends. Despite her chronic physical illness and depression, Nabīha is the sole supporter of her paternal household: she cooks, cleans, and runs all the errands.

Long subject to her brothers' mental, physical, and most likely sexual abuse, her sense of isolation is extreme. In her conversations with me she talked very little about these acts of violence (I learned about them from other sources). Instead, she talked insistently about herself as a victim of supernatural acts of violation and hostility. She said that the spell that her sister had put on her made 'people' (*ashkhāṣ*) enter her body. When I asked who these people were, she listed her brothers and father, the enemy-sister, and some other acquaintances. Her sense of having been violated is very strong and permanent. For example, she believes that the people inside her can see her intimate parts when she bathes or undresses, even if she is alone in the room. Other than dreaming of her mother at night, Nabīha's only source of comfort is the Koran, which she believes has a powerful healing effect. Yet she is unable to read it herself and is ashamed (because she feels polluted) to go into the mosque to hear it being recited or taught. She therefore settles for listening to the *mu'adhdhīn's* (announcer) announcements of the prayers from afar.

C. Nā'ila is a 35-year-old Muslim woman, who was born and raised in a rural community. After she left to go to university, she never returned to her native village. For a year or so after her graduation, she kept telling her parents that she was still enrolled in school, in order to justify her stay in the city. Then, at 25, she married an urban man and remained with him in the city. Like many other women, Nā'ila's life story is one of struggle. She married her first husband, even though she was not particularly in love with him, because she found living undercover too wearying. She hoped that her new status would release her from the oppression she had experienced at her parents' home. That had taken the form of tight control, sporadic physical violence and threats, and constantly putting her down. However, her husband turned out mean and abusive. So, less than three years into her marriage and with a two-year-old child, she initiated a divorce. About two years after she was divorced, Nā'ila remarried, this time a Christian man.

Throughout the turbulent years of marital hardships, the divorce procedures, and her single motherhood, Nā'ila never received help from her parents. Not only that, they – her mother in particular – did everything in their power to make her life miserable and break her down. She said to me once:

I am like this black box. They throw into me all their frustrations and bitterness. They call me a whore, a failure, a monster ... For years they've been systematically trying to destroy my self-image. It's been like that ever since I was a child. It is true that my mother knows how to hug and give material things, but she never gave me credit for what I was.

Over the years, whenever her parents became too violent, Nā'ila would cut off connection with them for months on end. But even when they were on visiting terms, she was careful not to receive gifts from them. She found it very difficult, though, to resist her mother's offers of cooked food and babysitting services, and would then regret it time and again when, during a fight, her mother would use that to accuse her of being a bad mother. I became acquainted with the details of Nā'ila's life story over the ten years of our friendship. Time and again, when she related the clashes with her mother to me, she would comment, 'I always had a gut feeling that I should not receive her gifts. I always sensed she'd want something in return'.

D. Dina is a 30-year-old Christian woman, who is employed part-time as an assistant to a hairdresser and as a cleaner. Born and raised in a city, she now lives with her husband and two little daughters in a different urban area. Her husband has been irregularly employed as a fisherman and he earned too little to maintain their family. When I met her, they lived in a very small and run-down one-room apartment. While her husband would spend long hours away from home, Dina was confined to it by her two little daughters and would constantly complain about it being suffocating and impossible to keep clean. Whenever she fell ill, which happened frequently, her husband would absent himself from the apartment for even longer hours than usual, and since Dina's mother and sisters lived in a different city, there was no one to help her. Her husband's mother, who lived a few streets away, never offered to help in such situations. Normally Dina was on visiting terms with her mother-in-law, who was also her maternal aunt, and the woman would give Dina's daughters gifts of food and cloths. But she was also quick to halt these on a whim; once she made a dress for the older girl, only to tear it apart in front of her when she grew angry with Dina.

Dina told me that her birth name had been different. It was Nihāya, which she translated as 'end of daughters'. The literal meaning of the word *nihāya* is 'end' and, like four or five other similar words, it is a popular name for a girl born after several daughters (there are no parallel boys' names that signify an end). Dina's first-born daughter died in her sleep when she was less than one year old and, interpreting her own name as the curse that brought about the death of her daughter, she dropped it and chose Dina. Like Nabīha, Dina was enrolled in school for the nine mandatory years, but her reading skills are not very strong either. Still, she manages the basic chores entailed by home-keeping, especially when they involve supervising her husband's direct financial obligations. As she put it, 'a woman needs to know how to calculate bills in her head, because she cannot always count on having a pen and a paper'.

When her second child was one year old, Dina considered holding a party for her at the nearby community centre, where she was employed as a cleaner. She counted on the manager letting her use the place for free and was contemplating preparing home-cooked dishes. She was slightly worried by the realization that she would have to ask her mother-in-law to use her kitchen, since she had no oven at home. But her major expense was to be the renting of a video camera and she was relying on the guests' cash gifts to cover the cost. The camera was an absolute necessity: three years earlier, when she filmed her elder child's first birthday, she did not record the sound

properly so the result turned out poor compared with videos of other children. She was determined to make up for the mistake and to produce a proper recording this time. The occasion of her second daughter's first birthday was clearly important, for her parents, she said, had offered to buy her a car. However, she did not intend to accept their offer because, just like Nā'ila, she was convinced that they would want something in return, and she was determined not to put herself so deeply in debt to them. She might, of course, have believed that they would not actually fulfil their promise, and she wanted to save herself the disappointment.<sup>9</sup>

### *The code of familial commitment*

To make sense of these women, isolated and lonely *inside* their families, we need some understanding of the principles that guide the channelling of loyalty and that indicate when people should or should not expect their relatives' support. In this section I analyse the code of familial commitment and its relation to the dynamics of gender and power. I argue that women's chances of receiving the support and protection of their family depend on their ability to maintain a delicate balance between power and weakness. But first, a few comments on 'Arab families'.

### SOME BASIC FEATURES OF GENDER RELATIONS IN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN FAMILIES<sup>10</sup>

Israeli-Palestinian families, like Arab families in general, are far from being monolithic units. In Israel, political-economic conditions, including diminishing lands and transition to a cash economy on the one hand, and on the other interrupted urbanization of rural populations along with general economic hardship, have pushed family arrangements of Palestinians in contradictory directions. They appear increasingly nuclear in some respects and interminably extended in others.<sup>11</sup> To compress a complex phenomenon into a very general description, I may say that Israeli-Palestinian families tend to be nuclear units that are embedded, to different degrees, within patrilineal (and sometimes also bilateral) kinship networks, in which new and old concepts of familial relations are constantly being renegotiated. These networks resemble the classic Middle Eastern patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988: 278) in the dynamics of power relations and co-operation between their segments, as well as in the core values of honour, shame, and group solidarity. At the same time, women have growing independent access to resources such as formal education, cash income, consumer goods and leisure consumerism, legal advice and protection, and global information. These resources have increased the latitude with which people may navigate contradictory obligations and have clearly affected gender relations. Still, males continue to have moral and practical superiority over females.

While the relevance of the term 'patriarchy' has recently been seriously debated, feminist scholars largely agree that, notwithstanding historical developments and local variations of kinship organization, male domination contin-

ues to pervade all other mechanisms of stratification.<sup>12</sup> Trying to articulate this persistence of male domination while avoiding the pitfalls of stiff or ahistorical structural definitions, Joseph (1996: 195) has offered a useful definition:

Patriarchy privileges males and elders (including elder women in the Arab world), and justifies this privilege in kinship terms. Females are generally taught to respect and defer to their fathers, brothers, grandparents, uncles, and, at times, male cousins. Young people are taught to respect and defer to their older kin. In turn, males are taught to take responsibility for their female kin, and elders are taught to protect and take responsibility for those younger than themselves.

In putting relationships at the centre of the definition, Joseph draws our attention to the complexity of gender and power relations within the family, and to the multiple and often contradictory aspects that they may assume in any particular circumstance. Moreover, this relational definition enables us to consider variations in gender relations along the different axes of connectivity and according to the particular positioning of a person inside each family.<sup>13</sup> It allows us to take into account the personality and personal history of family members and thus to take notice of agency, creativity – and loneliness.

#### NORMS OF FAMILIAL COMMITMENT AND THEIR APPLICABILITY TO WOMEN

Two major principles regulate commitment among Arab family members, Israeli Palestinians included: an ethos of solidarity to a (hierarchical) group, alongside an egalitarianism that encourages competition between sub-units within the group. These forces, seemingly opposing, actually work together well for men, but far less so for women. Both individualism and group solidarity are rooted in the heritage of segmentation, which entails an ongoing fission and fusion of lineages that create and dissolve larger alliances. Hence, Arabs are seen – and see themselves – as highly egalitarian, with a strong sense of self and a strong drive for individual autonomy (Lindholm 1996*a*; 1996*b*). At the same time, they are also group-oriented, highly committed to their families (Ginat 1997; Ibn Khaldun 1967). This dual principle is largely applicable to Israeli Palestinians also (Sa'ar 2000: chap. 5). In the case of men, the seeming contradiction between the norms of group loyalty and individualism is resolved, because potentially each man may head a group that will become identified with him. Men's normative striving for freedom and their proud competitive spirit therefore frame their loyalty and sacrifice as investments rather than as altruism.

Put differently, men's solidarity to the group 'makes sense', in that it is supposed to ensure each man the unconditional loyalty of his kin in time of need, and also because, as potential patriarchs, all males embody the identity of their group. Accordingly, there is supposedly no conflict of interest between themselves and their kin. Since men are expected to head a family (and, ideally, a clan), the group is built into their personal identity from the very start (see also Joseph 1993). Consequently, when they show loyalty to their group, men are exercising generalized exchange, which in turn constructs their concessions as tokens of power rather than of weakness. The dialectics of egoism and

group orientation that underlies the schema of moral commitment, then, is very gender-specific.

Women's connectivity to their group is different. While they, too, develop strong ties of affection and belonging to the group, their gender freights these sentiments with ambivalence. Unless they marry a paternal cousin (an ideal not often realized), they are removed from their natal family upon marriage, only to enter a new group in which they will always remain 'strangers' (*garība*) (Yahya-Yunis 2001). Women thus have only faint prospects of 'becoming one' with their group. Concomitantly, they cannot readily expect its unconditional protection. The official obligation of their blood relatives to extend lifelong support to them usually stipulates the women's conceding their inheritance rights. This notwithstanding, as lifelong members and embodiments of their family's honour, they are expected to show unconditional loyalty to it. Differently from men, their motivation in doing so is framed as altruistic. Officially, women may also expect the lifelong protection of their blood relatives, but, as my cases showed, the actual terms of this protection or support can be stretched rather thin or even be neglected altogether. While some women successfully manipulate their birthright to protection when negotiating their position *vis-à-vis* their husband's family, a significant number of others are left practically alone.

I mentioned earlier that the anthropological literature abounds with descriptions of women who manoeuvre their daily situation, relying on the co-operation of their blood relatives, and that similar situations can be found among Israeli-Palestinian women also. How, then, are we to interpret the cases of women, such as those I have described above, who refrain from resorting to their relatives because they know they will be disappointed? Building on my analysis of the mechanisms that guide familial commitment, I argue that the likelihood that a woman will fail to receive her relatives' support and protection depends on the degree to which she conducts herself normatively, and that in this respect normative behaviour is determined not only by adherence to the formal code of sexual morality. Officially, a woman loses her right to protection if she behaves immorally and offends the honour of either her natal family or the one she has married into. In practice, there are two other situations that may lead to this result. One is that she becomes too powerful or too independent. The other is that she becomes too weak. In other words, the obligation to extend support and protection to a female relative is contingent upon an ongoing interplay between gender and power within particular sets of kinship relations.<sup>14</sup>

### *Discussion*

I said that the expectation that men should be loyal to their group should not be understood as unconditional willingness to sacrifice, but as an investment that is expected to yield group mobilization on their behalf in times of need. This feeds into a general link that exists in Israeli-Palestinian culture between masculinity and power and which here takes both a practical and a symbolic form. In practical terms, individual men become more powerful when they are backed by a group; symbolically, regarding the loyalty of each

man as an investment frames it as a form of generosity and this, again, entails power. In fact the link between masculinity and power is a general characteristic of Israeli-Palestinian culture. When we regard masculinity as a positional identity (a man is invariably a father, a brother, a husband, or a son), we see that it incorporates structural superiority. At the same time, femininity as a positional identity incorporates subordination.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, while men are in no danger of becoming weak or vulnerable by submitting to the edicts of their group, women's loyalty is expected to be purely altruistic and devoid of self-interest.

Group loyalty, then, is constructed according to gender principles. A more comprehensive definition of the connections between the two would read as follows. Men derive personal power from the support of their group and, conversely, their chances of receiving such support increase the more powerful they appear to be. Women, on the other hand, stand to lose their group's protection if they become too powerful, but also if they become too weak. I will illustrate this through the cases presented earlier, starting with In'ām and Nā'ila, in the eyes of their community women who have become too powerful.

In'ām and Nā'ila, largely due to their independent income and opinions, have slid significantly towards the masculine end of the gender continuum. Being women, however, their venturing onto what is locally considered masculine territory has not been welcome. Instead, it has generated serious suspicions and has paved the way to their experience of abandonment. In'ām, who is married to an unemployed husband and is the mother of two children with disabilities, has escaped degrading poverty through her hard work and resourceful behaviour. Nā'ila too has extricated herself from difficult situations, that of an abused wife and then of a divorced woman. She has remarried and has launched a successful professional career. At first sight, both women seem to have behaved in perfectly legitimate and responsible ways; hard-working and capable women are prevalent in Israeli-Palestinian culture, and more often than not they are looked at with much appreciation and even admiration (Sa'ar n.d.a). What distinguishes In'ām and Nā'ila from other 'strong' women is that each has gone beyond the legitimate boundary of feminine strength.

Let us look at In'ām first. Time and again, immediately after she comes out of an acute financial crisis, she launches into luxurious spending, such as changing the furniture of her living room, adding a porch to the house, or redoing the bathroom. Likewise, she consistently dresses herself and her daughters according to the latest fashion, with a special taste for revealing and provocative styles. In her own recollection of her life story, In'ām sees mostly hardship, and regards herself as a survivor and as a sacrificial mother. Indeed, with her unrelenting encouragement and support, her children have had significant educational achievements despite their disabilities. She has also managed to maintain a successful business, despite her husband's daily abuse and his recurrent attempts to forbid her to work. Her neighbours and relatives, however, interpret her situation differently. What In'ām considers spousal abuse her community sees as normal masculine behaviour. Concentrating on her squandering style and on her self-nurtured beauty, they classify her as proud and potentially immoral. Thus, instead of sympathizing with her in her adversity, they express envy and resentment.

Nā'ila has been caught in a similar double bind. She refused to remain in what to her surroundings seemed a perfectly good marriage – her first husband was a Muslim like herself and an upcoming professional – only because in her subjective experience it was oppressive. She chose the morally dubious status of a divorced woman for apparently no justified reason; worse still, getting divorced after she had a child decidedly framed her as selfish, hence a bad mother. Here again, 'apparently' signifies a gap between this woman's interpretation of her situation, which is the one I myself have adopted here, and the normative local one. In the hearts of her relatives and community members Nā'ila, like In'ām, kindles very little sympathy. Instead, most of them, men and women, identify far more readily with her former husband. For example, soon after her divorce a paternal aunt said to her admonishingly, 'See how skilful my daughter has been in keeping her marriage intact'. 'This daughter', Nā'ila commented to me, 'is a battered woman'.

Generally, both genders are inclined to side with men rather than with women, and this is all the more so when women deviate from normative feminine behaviour. In the case of Nā'ila, the deviation from normative femininity is expressed in her strong opinions, in her independent decision-making (she left the village, divorced, remarried, etc.), and especially in her violating the taboo on religious exogamy.<sup>16</sup> In the case of In'ām, it is expressed in an odd combination of hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine behaviours. On the one hand, she has adopted a highly sensual dress style and body language. On the other hand, she acts as a primary breadwinner and, moreover, she carries this role beyond the level of necessary survival: remodelling the house or giving generous gifts to her brothers are considered men's chores. Normative gender behaviour, of course, is a flexible notion. It varies within the community and sometimes even within the family.<sup>17</sup> Yet this does not render the gender categories themselves obsolete. In Israeli-Palestinian culture, the social order remains thoroughly gendered and, moreover, the gender order continues to buttress male domination over females. Therefore, whatever the official definitions of legitimate femininity and masculinity, the crucial element that informs the production of gender relations is power. Accordingly, power is at play also in the susceptibility of women to become lonely and isolated inside their families.

In Israeli-Palestinian culture it is perfectly legitimate for women to be highly skilled, enterprising, and resourceful, but only as long as they appear sacrificial and unselfish (Sa'ar n.d.a). Whatever the scope of their achievements, strong women may not attempt to convert these into public status or political capital. Public power and self-interest belong in the masculine domain, so women who aspire to make personal gains are at a high risk of losing status. In other words, the positive or negative framing of strong Israeli-Palestinian women depends on whether their motives are seen as altruistic (sacrificial and heroic) or egotistic. In'ām and Nā'ila fall into the latter category. They resist being classified as poor or purely altruistic and therefore are seen by their relatives and neighbours as selfish. By my (Sa'ar n.d.a) analytic distinction between strength (which is inwardly oriented and hence legitimately feminine) and power (public and masculine), women like In'ām and Nā'ila may

be said to become *too* powerful, hence a threat to the gender order. Women who are 'too powerful' face sanctions that range from physical violence (including murder) and outright ostracism to silent isolation and disregard by blood relatives. The latter effects, on which I have focused here, are latent sanctions that usually take place without official severing of family ties.

In their resistance to being classified as weak, In'ām and Nā'ila exemplify the negative correlation between females' power and the commitment of their blood relatives to support and protect them. But would the reactions be different had these women adopted a more humble and submissive style? Ironically, the answer is probably not. 'A woman', several interviewees said to me, 'must be strong, or else they'll crush her'. We find a blatant example of this in the case of Nabīha, whose poor health, low morale, and overall destitution evoke no sympathy in the hearts of her relatives. Her extreme weakness, moreover, makes not only for lack of affection, but also invites violation of her body, belongings, personal space, and other basic domestic rights. It is interesting in this regard to compare Nabīha's situation with that of her assertive sister, whom, by sheer objective measurement, we would expect to be worse off. Paradoxical as this may seem, this sister, who is divorced for the second time, self-employed, and very liberal in her interactions with men, enjoys much greater freedom of movement than does Nabīha, and although she resides in a unit adjacent to her father's house, she is exempt from the duties of maintaining it.

Not that females' weakness automatically means degradation. After all, submissiveness and humbleness are much celebrated feminine traits among Israeli Palestinians. It is customary to hear people talk about their mothers, for example, as loving and compassionate, particularly if these mothers are said to have suffered poverty, violence, and related kinds of hardship. In popular discourse, such women are hailed for the kindness of their hearts and for their tender caring, and their suffering is depicted as heroic. Yet in various cases I came across, the descriptions that accompanied such comments suggested that the actual experiences of the women had been devoid of glory and that it was plausible that they had experienced loneliness and isolation akin to what I have identified here. Moreover, my observations and long-term acquaintanceships reveal that the same people, who in a verbal interview would describe their mothers as 'poor' (*faqīra*) and infinitely tender, inclined to treat them harshly and contemptuously in routine interactions. In a similar vein, the children of women who are 'too powerful' may join the general delegitimization that surrounds their mothers and think of them as irresponsible, untrustworthy, and immoral.

Contemplating the four examples presented in this article we see that, with the exception of Nabīha, the women invest much effort to avoid being framed as miserable (*galbāna*) and to keep themselves above the line of pity. The results differ. At the far end of the weakness-power continuum we have seen Nabīha, who lives in extremely harsh circumstances and who seems to have surrendered to her situation completely. We have then seen Dina, who is also poor, uneducated, and isolated, but who is married and a mother, whose health is better and who thus insists on keeping up public respectability. At the opposite end, we have seen In'ām and then Nā'ila who, being more openly

critical of the moral code of familial commitment, have violated the normative balance between power and femininity. Through their independent resources, opinions, and decision-making, they have broken the silence around the lesser familial commitment towards women. They have opted, each within her capabilities, to utilize the opportunities for employment, education, and legal defence that Palestinian women may get in Israel today and, at the risk of violent sanctions, have compensated for the loss of traditional familial protection with new independent resources.

### *Conclusion*

In this article I have argued that women in Israeli-Palestinian families are susceptible to becoming isolated and lonely. While by no means the inevitable lot of most women in this culture, the phenomenon is not random or fortuitous. Rather, it is rooted in the code of familial commitment, which is primarily masculine and includes women only secondarily. The code of familial commitment is masculine because the principles that compose it correspond to patrilineal kin groups. Only for men do the two seemingly contradictory values underlying the code of moral conduct – egalitarian individualism and loyalty to a hierarchical group – go hand in hand. Men can be loyal to their kin group and still strive to overpower their brothers because, as potential patriarchs, each one of them is fully identified with his kin. Their loyalty to their kin is therefore conceptually equivalent to loyalty to themselves. Further, and most importantly, it is constructed in terms of power even when it appears as meek compliance with the collective dictate. Women, on the other hand, can hardly become so unequivocally identified with the kin group. Officially, it is true, they retain a lifelong sense of belonging and often also usufruct rights within their family of orientation. However, their marriage (actual or potential) is constructed as a form of abandonment (see also Sa'ar 2000: 143, 218), which in turn facilitates their own symbolic or practical abandonment by their brothers. The principal obligation of the group to protect its women is intended, first and foremost, to reinforce the group's honour rather than protect individual women, whose position within it is frail to begin with. It may therefore be legitimately withdrawn if the woman is deemed to have deviated from normative behaviour. Yet at all times, women's loyalty to the group is expected to be and is constructed as altruistic, devoid of expectations of reward.

Put in the context of existing anthropological literature on Arab and Middle Eastern societies, the argument presented here bears relevance to two themes in particular. First, it calls into question the common knowledge that solidarity between men is equivalent to solidarity between people, which was adopted uncritically by much of the professional literature.<sup>18</sup> In earlier works (for example, Antoun 1972; Peristiany 1966; but also Ginat 1997) the uncritical acceptance of the ethos that men *are* society emanated mainly from a general gender blindness that characterized the scholarship of the time.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, some of this has permeated more recent and explicitly feminist works. In their effort to refute the passive image of Arab women, feminist scholars have celebrated their strategizing capabilities (e.g. Bourdieu 1977;

Lewando-Hundt 1984; Nelson 1974). Looking for the implementation of these capabilities, these scholars have turned, once again, to the official obligation to protect female relatives, concentrating this time on how women actively manipulate this code. These works have indeed made a substantial contribution in exposing the agency and heterogeneity of Arab (and other third-world) women. Yet the attempts to de-orientalize Arab women and to disprove the stereotype that they are categorically oppressed have also had the effect of leaving the masculinist construction of familial commitment largely unchallenged.

A second theoretical line that is pertinent to the present argument is what we may call the 'separate worlds' paradigm. As Davis-Schaefer (1983), Holmes-Eber (1997), Michael (1997), Nelson (1974), and others tell us, in gender-segregated societies the status of women is determined not in comparison with men's but according to a gender-specific scale. Within their separate social world, women can acquire significant power, wealth, prestige, and influence. Since these status components are lost to observers who attempt to measure them according to the standards of the men's world, the separate worlds paradigm rejects the generic term 'woman's status'. Instead, it seeks to devise a more nuanced terminology compatible with the complexity of women's life experiences. While the notion that the universe of Middle Eastern societies is split into public-male and private-female spheres also existed in pre-feminist literature, feminist ethnographers from the 1970s on have looked at it differently. Instead of seeing gender segregation as an obvious source of women's oppression, feminists proposed looking at it as a source of empowerment for women and even as a limitation for men (Nelson 1974). This was part of the broader feminist quest for female sisterhood, which has given rise to a search for traditional settings of homosocial women's gatherings. Prominent scholars of this school, such as Makhoul (1979), Mernissi (1994), or Wolf (1974), who have written about competition and status hierarchies between women, have also presented their separate social world as an empowering setting. As part of the aforementioned anti-orientalist trend, the women's world has been presented as a corrective experience where women, whom the patrilineal group tends to reduce to mere role-holders, have room to assert their personalities and charisma, to cultivate affection and loyalty and, through these, to initiate mobility.

While my analysis of women's isolation inside families has referred primarily to the official obligation of men to protect women, the ethnography also presented incidents of lack of solidarity among women. We encountered mothers and sisters who not only fail to support their daughters or sisters in times of distress but who become outright hostile the lonelier and more isolated the latter become. In fact, Israeli-Palestinian culture explicitly discourages female solidarity (Sa'ar n.d.a). More precisely, friendship and love between women exist and are legitimate, but only so long as they act as a levelling mechanism. As I argued above with respect to male protection, female solidarity, too, is contingent upon women maintaining their proper position within the kinship power structure. Notwithstanding the norm of mutual aid between related females, if they become too powerful or too weak women are most likely to lose not only the obligatory protection of their brothers and fathers, but also the affection and support of their mothers and sisters.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>*Jozek byihibbek u'inti ganiyya, ahlek byihibbuki u'inti qawiyya*. A popular proverb cited by one of the women interviewed for this article.

<sup>2</sup>Local concepts of familial support include *ta'aṣṣub*, or *ʿaṣṣabiyya*. The latter is discussed at length by Ibn Khaldun (1967: 98–102) and is usually translated into English as ‘group feeling’. In contemporary Palestinian vernacular, these words mean political, ethnic, or economic solidarity and fidelity. The instrumental aspects of familial solidarity are also expressed through proverbs and metaphors, such as: *īd waḥade* (a single hand); *ana waʿakhūy ʿala iben ʿammi, ana waʿiben ʿammi ʿala al-garīb* (me and my brother against our paternal cousin, me and my paternal cousin against the foreigner); *uṣṣor akhāka ṭhālīman kāna aw maṭhlūman* (support your brother, whether he is right or wrong). Other terms, signifying the expressive effects of familial togetherness, are *difʿ* (‘warmth’, used as a metaphor for familial warmth), *al-ʿāṭifiyya* (‘affection’, often used to describe family relations).

<sup>3</sup>Shalhoub-Kevorkian (1998: 191–2) writes: ‘the Palestinian community is strongly committed to male preference. Hence, when the girl becomes the victim of abuse she is in double danger. Because of her social status she is denied her rights for support, understanding, and protection when abused ... Women/girls who were victims of abuse and sought help were making an implied statement that their family was incapable of defending them. This is regarded an “anti-cultural” and unacceptable act, because such issues should remain within the family. A proverb says: “Beyond my door – there lies my ridicule”. Seeking help from external bodies or sources may be regarded as betrayal’.

<sup>4</sup>Fromm-Reichmann (1959: 327) defines real loneliness as ‘the state of mind in which the fact that there were people in one’s past life is more or less forgotten and the hope that there may be interpersonal relationships in one’s future life is out of the realm of expectation or imagination’. This type of loneliness, she says, is ‘beyond the state of feeling sorry for oneself’.

<sup>5</sup>Weiss (1973: 33) has made a similar distinction between loneliness of emotional isolation, which he defines as ‘initiated by the absence of a close emotional attachment’ and loneliness of social isolation, which is ‘initiated by the absence of social integrative relationships’.

<sup>6</sup>Ginat (1997) enumerates situations in which Bedouin *men* may become repudiated by their kin. He emphasizes that repudiation (*tashmīs*) is regarded as an extreme measure, which groups resort to only when the consequences of retaining the deviant member seem exceptionally costly. Even in such cases, moreover, the life of the ostracized man is not in danger. He is likely to find refuge in distant tribes or communities, and may be readmitted to his group in the future.

<sup>7</sup>This article is based on fieldwork in 1993–4 and 1997–9 in two urban communities, as well as on ongoing relationships with individual women in several rural localities inside Israel. The ethnographic cases presented here are based on a combination of formal interviews, casual talks, and participant observations.

<sup>8</sup>I should note that Christian women in Israel have a very hard time obtaining official divorce and, indeed, the divorce rate among Christian Palestinians is very low. In 1995, 0.8 per cent of Christian women in Israel were divorced, compared with 1.5 per cent of Muslim women (ICBS 1998: table 1) and 11 per cent of Jewish women (ICBS 1999: table 2.19). (These numbers do not include women who divorced and remarried.)

<sup>9</sup>For a vivid complement to this ethnographic description, I recommend Abouzeid’s (1989) novella, *Year of the elephant*. This is a poignant story of a Moroccan woman who, after being arbitrarily divorced at an advanced age and left in utter economic destitution, is completely deserted by her blood relatives.

<sup>10</sup>Palestinians constitute roughly 18 per cent of Israel’s citizens (ICBS 1998; 1999). This is a primarily rural population, 76 per cent being Muslims, 15 per cent Christians, and about 9 per cent Druzes. My research refers to the first two groups only.

<sup>11</sup> See also Al-Haj (1989), Al-Thakeb (1985), Kanaana (1975), and McCann (1997) for discussions of innovative combinations between seemingly traditional habitation arrangements (patrilocal co-residential units) and diverse relational patterns (namely varying degrees of resource-sharing). For other studies on the variability in Arab family patterns, see Joseph (1996), Moors (1996), Peters (1978), and Tucker (1991).

<sup>12</sup> See Kandiyoti (1992) and Moghadam (1993) for critical discussions of patriarchy in Middle Eastern societies. See Eisenstein (1984: chap. 4), Mann (1986), and Walby (1986: chap. 3) on the relevance of the term 'patriarchy' in post-industrial societies at the core of the world system.

<sup>13</sup> Another good illustration of the advantages of a relational approach is presented by Moors (1996). Her work on power and property of Palestinian women shows how the value of property is determined by the relational positions of its holders rather than by sheer material worth.

<sup>14</sup> See also Hasan (1999) on the versatile use of the concept of female sexual immorality to legitimize violence against women who become too powerful.

<sup>15</sup> For a theoretical elaboration of the positional component of gender, see Mouffe (1992).

<sup>16</sup> See Sa'ar (n.d.b) on the differential application of the ethnic-exogamy taboo on women and on men in Israeli-Palestinian culture.

<sup>17</sup> See Sa'ar (2000) for ethnographic examples of a range of legitimate feminine behaviours.

<sup>18</sup> See also Abu-Lughod's (1989) criticism of the masculinist bias in the anthropological literature on segmentation in the Middle East.

<sup>19</sup> I call these works 'gender-blind' not because they do not 'see' women. In fact, many of these ethnographies dedicate a chapter to 'the woman'. Their gender blindness rather lies in their inability to see the gender of *men* or the intervention of gender in the 'general' aspects of society.

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## **Tenues bien en main mais solitaires: les femmes dans les familles israélo-palestiniennes**

### *Resumé*

Les ouvrages récents sur les femmes arabes ont mis l'accent sur leur capacité d'action et leurs talents d'activité stratégique. En particulier, les chercheurs ont mis en relief l'utilisation habile que font les femmes de leurs droits consanguins pour obtenir une protection et un support à vie au sein du groupe patriarcal. Je prends à parti cette généralisation en utilisant des matériaux ethnographiques sur les Palestiniens à l'intérieur d'Israël. Je soutiens que le droit des femmes à la protection est plus limité qu'il ne l'est couramment assumé. L'analyse du code des devoirs familiaux, et plus particulièrement de l'interaction entre les rapports de sexe et le pouvoir, révèle qu'afin d'obtenir l'obligation de leurs familles, les femmes Israélo-palestiniennes doivent maintenir un juste milieu délicat entre leur pouvoir et leur faiblesse. Pour des raisons diverses les femmes ne sont souvent pas capables d'atteindre un tel équilibre et, en conséquence, éprouvent l'isolement et la solitude.

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