

# What is worse than being a refugee in Gaza?

In photographs of groups of school graduates in the office of Mary Hass in Gaza one can see the whole process. In photographs from the years prior to the Intifada, the kindergarten teachers whom Hass has educated were usually wearing Western clothes. The courageous girls among them were even photographed smiling with boys in narrow jeans and short-sleeved shirts. The graduates' photos of the last two years without exception show that the girls who are going to be teachers accept the rule regarding the modesty of dress of Moslem women, including headscarves. And this is only an outward expression of the matter. When the Palestinians look back on the four and a half years of the Intifada, they discover that not only most political aims have not been reached, but also that the internal social revolution announced in the first phases of the struggle has not materialized. Contrary to the forecasts at the beginning of the uprising, an amazing regression occurred in the status of women, more than in any other sphere. It is evident in Gaza, but also to some extent on the West Bank.

Mary Hass, who is responsible for the education of infants in the Gaza Strip on behalf of the Quakers organization and one of the activist women in the area, said that it all started earlier when Israel supported HAMAS, the Islamic Resistance Movement, and the activists of other organizations were in Israeli prisons, but that the events of the uprising made things happen. 'The uprising itself was, of course, important





and quite positive', she says, 'but from the women's point of view it entailed a lot of destructive aspects, especially in Gaza.' 'What, for instance?', I asked her. 'The influence of the HAMAS has increased and this is shown by various things: for example, in the Gaza Strip every woman was forced to go out veiled. This hadn't been the case before. Cultural activities developed, but singing and social meetings were forbidden. Women are the victims. Big weddings are also forbidden, so that marriages are much cheaper and therefore girls are married much younger and then they are divorced sooner. And those who are not divorced, must have a lot of children because this has become a kind of national mission. 'Not exactly an example for the advancement of women in society,' I said. 'No, this is an oppressed society that considers the fight against the occupation as its main goal, and the issue of the status of its women is always marginal in relation to everything else.

On her way home to the respectable al-Ramal quarter of Gaza, Mary Hass drives cautiously through the crowds of barefoot children who wave her goodbye. 'The soldiers blocked my way home with barrels on Thursday night, now I have to go there through all these alleys, Jesus Christ, this is terrible'. Hass, originally an Israeli Arab from Haifa moved twenty years ago to the Gaza Strip with her husband Hammad. Both left the Communist Party after the invasion of Prague, and Hammad, originating from Gaza, decided to return home after he had lived in Haifa since Israel's War of Liberation. There, his wife became the central personality in the Gaza education system. This job, that made her a well known figure in the city and in the camps, enables her to continue going around in a short summer dress and with her head uncovered, perhaps the only woman in Gaza who still dares. But even she is not entirely immune from harassments. 'Sometimes children tell me to wear traditional dress, But I tell them I am a good Palestinian also without it.' Most of her colleagues, even those who hold senior jobs in the city and reject the veil ideologically, take it always in their handbags when they go out into the street and mostly also use it.



'I tried to fight against it, but I was attacked several times, they were throwing stones and eggs at me and there was nobody to protect me', says Iman D, a researcher on women's problems. No wonder that she prefers not to give her full name. Two weeks ago, she recounts, a girl went into the street bare-headed and one of the HAMAS activists demanded her to put on the traditional veil. The girl refused, told him that he wasn't her father and he had no right to tell her what to do. The HAMAS fanatic started to pull her hair. When a falafel seller from a nearby stand tried to intervene on her behalf, a gang of masked men appeared, beat up the man until he needed hospital treatment and burned his falafel stand. 'Imagine how the girl felt after that', Iman says. 'To prevent such incidents, women who believe in their right to go without a veil also prefer to give up,' In the beginning people said the Intifada helps to liberate women, that they participate in demonstrations, take part in the national struggle. This was only true in the first phases. Women participated in the big demonstrations and in the people's committees. Later they were banned by the army, who started to arrest activist women. These arrests frightened women; in Arab society, when a woman is arrested even for national reasons, this is considered a heavy blow to her honour and to that of her family. If she is not yet married, for instance, she will hardly find a marriage partner afterwards, unless he belongs to the progressive forces, appreciates what she did and marries her for this reason. But on the whole the men, fathers and husbands, have pressed the women to stop their activities and when the Intifada was led by the masked men, women became a marginal group. Simultaneously, because the progressive forces did not succeed in reaching a solution, the rise of the HAMAS took place and this organisation was, of course, against every advancement of women. It also became a political issue: all women go with their heads covered this is a show of strength for HAMAS, as if the whole city were religious and belongs to them. So they used all means to force them.

This process of forcing women to wear the traditional veil is described in a fascinating article by Rima Hammami in

Middle East Report; a Palestinian researcher from Temple University, USA, she is writing a doctorate on the development of women's culture in the camps. The veil was originally part of the dress that expressed the affiliation to a certain village or to a certain class. The women in Gaza, mostly the elder ones, wore it as part of their tradition, not giving it political, national, or religious significance. The Intifada, Hammami explains, caused a changeover in the process of the Islamization of the uprising, the HAMAS adopted it as a symbol; it attributed meanings to the veil that did not exist before. 'In the summer of 1988', Hammami writes, 'messages appears for the first time on the wall calling upon the daughters of Islam to wear the veil as a sign of solidarity with the holy victims'. Cleverly, bare-headed women were presented as desecrating the memory of the fallen heroes, even though many women at that time were active in various resistance organizations, chiefly in the People's Committees.

The pressures reached their peak in August 1988 when two women activists who did not comply with the demands of the young HAMAS members were attacked by the mob, after the boys persuaded the crowd that they were actually collaborators: 'When no soldiers were in the neighbourhood, bare-headed women became a good target for stone-throwing children.' Chasing them became a kind of national sport that got legitimation as being allegedly part of the struggle against the occupation. There were also cases where young HAMAS members broke into girls' schools and called upon them to wear the veil. 'At the end, the Islamic movement succeeded in creating some confusion with regard to the task of women in the uprising: It was not clear if they should take an active part in the resistance against the occupation, or just sit at home, bear children and show their different cultural identity and their solidarity with the fallen heroes by wearing the veil'. The responsibility, according to Hammami, rests first of all on the [Palestinian] Left organisations and secondly on the United National Command [of the Intifada].

'Only in August 1989, after the attack on the two women activists, was a leaflet published that condemned the attacks

but by then it was too late. It is hard to stop the process. There were wall writings against the harassments, but they did not help, perhaps because those who do such things are just boys who do not listen to anybody', Iman D confirms. Before the Intifada 70% of the women in Gaza went out unveiled, today 99% wear the veil'. Mary Hass, of the one percent: 'It is the fault of the leadership. It is Israel's fault, too, because till the HAMAS men stopped being nice to Israel and started stabbing people, Israel encouraged this movement with the aim of weakening the progressive movements that called for a compromise with Israel'. But she, too, does not absolve the national leadership of guilt. 'Even the so-called progressives did not understand the importance of the issue, the men thought that women are anyhow a negligible factor, so they agreed to all kinds of compromises with HAMAS on this issue, allegedly for the sake of national unity. They did not understand that in this case they sacrifice much more of their values'. Hass remembers nostalgically that before the Intifada, everyone would go to the beach to swim, 'entire Palestinian families with girls in bikinis'.

Today there is none of that. Bikinis are out of the question, and no girl would dare to go to the beach, even in a regular bathing suit. The shores are empty. But this is part of a deeper process, because all free-time cultural activities have ceased here. Arab culture has traditions of mourning that forbid any form of amusement for one year after death, and because there were so many dead, everything has ceased, no more picnics on the beach, no weddings, no cinema, nothing.

The whole of Palestinian society suffers from this continuous mourning. But the women, as usual, suffer more. 'The men continue to go out to social meetings and to work. For the women, weddings were the main social events, and now this, too, is forbidden, so that they spend most of their time at home', writes Hammami. This is also the opinion of Amal Diggs, an UNWRA social worker in the Jebalya camp. 'In the past', she says, 'the girls used to come back from school and go to visit girl friends, and sometimes there were also clubs and activities'. Most clubs were closed on the order of

the army, or of HAMAS. Diggs, who was born in Jebaliya, studied social work at Bethlehem University and returned to the camp, says that most girls go to school in the morning, come back home, clean the courtyard or watch TV, if they have a TV set. In the past, they sometimes got permission from the males to go out; now the parents are afraid of demonstrations and harassment from the HAMAS, and fearful that the girls might get into trouble; so they rarely allow them.

Jebaliya, Israel's Soweto. Diggs, who in spite of everything covers her head carefully in a veil (Before the Intifada I did not wear this, why all of a sudden?), walks in the narrow, unpaved alleys, where the sewage flows in open ditches between unplastered concrete buildings. She knows her children and the distressed families in every corner. Recently, she recounts, the situation has seriously deteriorated; there is a lot of unemployment; there are no sources of living in the city; and the economic situation is getting worse from day to day. There is no money to buy food, many people sell their possessions in the marketplace or depend, like 43 years ago, on the flour and rice rations distributed by UNWRA. And again, the first to suffer from the shortage are the women. 'Thus, parents want their daughters to get married sooner, because this means one less mouth to feed, so girls get married now at the age of 14; 15 in many cases'.

Before the Intifada there was no such pressure to have girls staying at home, and people took more care to let them finish their studies; this was one of the reasons to let them marry later. Today many schoolgirls stop studying, because they are anyhow often at home during the curfew, and besides it is much cheaper to get married. So the men can also avoid a second wife. Many get divorced when they are still young, soon after they have married, 'because what comes easily, goes easily.'

According to Hanny Altaly, instructor at the UNWRA Women's centre in the camp, the price of weddings, decided by the families of the bridegroom and the bride, has dropped enormously since the beginning of the Intifada. 'Before', Atalya says, 'it would cost 4,000 *dinar*. The husband had to give his



bride a lot of gold, jewels and a great wedding. Today, there are no big weddings, they also give less gold and pay perhaps 2,000 *dinar*. Because of the Intifada, many families also want their sons to marry sooner, so that perhaps then they will not get into trouble. This applies to the parents of the girls as well, so everybody marries younger.' 'Is this good?' 'No, because if the man doesn't work hard to get a wife, he doesn't appreciate her enough later. That is why many more Palestinians get divorced now.'

Ataly (25, engaged) is closely acquainted with the problem of divorce because of two 17 year old girls in her care. They got divorced two years after they married at the age of 15. 'He was my cousin and his mother chose me, but later she did not get along with me and I used to run away many times to my parents', remembers one of the young divorcees.

A son was born during the time she was married but when she returned home, she was forced to leave him with his father's family because her parents refused to feed another baby. She opted for a divorce after her husband, not satisfied with her services, married a second wife.

'This, too, is the result of the declining price of dowries', Diggs explains. 'Many men can suddenly afford to take a second wife. Before the Intifada it was much more costly for them'. 'So this happens more frequently than before the Intifada?' 'Much more. Many men also threaten their wives, that they will take another woman. So their wives have to do everything they want.'

The reason why HAMAS is stronger in Gaza than anywhere else – in the opinion of the local inhabitants – is that there is a deeper despair there because of the many densely-populated refugee camps and worse economic conditions. Also the proximity of the Gaza Strip to Egypt, and the fact that many students from Gaza have studied in a country where Islamic fundamentalism is prevalent in the universities, have played a part in the developments in the Gaza Strip.

The situation of women in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has not yet deteriorated so much. Attempts to harass unveiled women in places like Ramallah or the Old

City of Jerusalem have encountered sharp resistance from radical organisations who have beaten the HAMAS activists, 'so that they have not dared again', as one activist reports. In Hebron the atmosphere is more conservative, but even there it has not reached the fundamentalism of the Gaza Strip.

In Ramallah and Jenin, three and a half years after the start of the uprising, the women find it hard to report outstanding achievements in their struggle for equality. 'The Intifada has changed the approach toward women, but not their status', says one of the female activists. Another woman points out, that a true participation of women existed only in the first spontaneous phase of the uprising, 'simply because nothing was established and everything was possible'.

When the Intifada started to become established, it pushed women back into their traditional tasks. 'The uprising in general', says Dr. Azmi Bishara, head of the faculty of philosophy in Bir Zeit University, 'is a national revolt, with conservative elements. From the start it was a mistake to regard it as a popular social revolution with class elements'.

As in every uprising, the problem of women remained marginal, though not entirely so. In December 1990, a month before the Gulf War, the Bisan Research Institute, which publishes studies on Palestinian society, organised a conference with the participation of 400 women, researchers and activists, under the headline *The Intifada and Several Social Aspects of Women*. The aim of the conference, the organisers proclaimed at the opening ceremony, was 'to hold a dialogue of women from various trends, to express their problems as women and present proposals for solutions towards the advancement of Palestinian women'. 'Many social groups', Izat Abdul Hadi, manager of the Institute said there, 'have been pushed to the margins in the course of the uprising, because they renounced their interests in favour of the national interests.'

The Institute and its researchers are opposed to this and attach great importance to the issue of women, 'which is an integral part of Palestinian culture,' said Hadi. He holds that there should be a positive link between the national and the

social struggle, and that they must not rule out each other.

To show the importance they attribute to the issue, representatives of the recognised Palestinian leadership also spoke at the conference. 'Women fulfil an important task in our society, to ignore this task is a reactionary approach. They must not be sacrificed to the general trend in the Arab world which seeks to return to the values of tradition and is opposed to Western values', said Feisal Al-Husseini at the meeting. Dr. Riad Malki of Bir Zeit University also pointed out the need for a critical approach toward the attitude of Palestinian society to women. 'They have made their contribution to a society that has never taken their needs seriously', said the radical lecturer.

The women who spoke at the conference reviewed the part they and other women play in the uprising. 'The Intifada has no regular social programme that could help to develop and establish the role of women in society', said Eileen Kuttub, sociology lecturer of Bir Zeit who accused the women's organisations. 'They,' she said, 'have not translated the dialectical relationship between the national and the social issues into practical terms'. Kutab argued that women are the weakest victims of the fundamentalist movement, but she also claimed that they have not achieved much. Nahla Alasali, lecturer in Arabic at Bir Zeit, pointed out that there are no women in the PLO Higher Committee and in other institutions their representatives are perhaps two to five percent of the leadership.