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## International Feminist Journal of Politics

### WHY PALESTINE IS A FEMINIST ISSUE: A RECKONING WITH WESTERN FEMINISM IN A TIME OF GENOCIDE

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## WHY PALESTINE IS A FEMINIST ISSUE: A RECKONING WITH WESTERN FEMINISM IN A TIME OF GENOCIDE

### Introduction

Nicola Pratt, University of Warwick, n.c.pratt@warwick.ac.uk

At the time of writing, Israel has waged a relentless and barbaric war on the Gaza Strip for more than 400 days. No one can say that they did not know. As Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, an adviser to South Africa's legal team, stated, during South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice in January 2024, this is, "the first genocide in history where its victims are broadcasting their own destruction in the desperate so far vain hope that the world might do something" (The National Desk, 2024). UN officials have described conditions in the Gaza Strip as 'apocalyptic' (Nichols 2024). Volunteer doctors returning from Gaza have reported experiences unlike any other, even after working in numerous global conflict zones (for example, Begum 2024). Most hospitals are barely functioning, subjected to repeated attacks by the Israeli military. Education has been interrupted for hundreds of thousands of students for a second consecutive academic year. The human toll is staggering: at least 43,000 people have been killed, with over 100,000 injured. Thousands more remain trapped beneath the rubble of destroyed homes or places of shelter. Around 90% of Palestinians have been displaced, many multiple times. Most live in insanitary, makeshift camps without access to electricity, running water, or toilets. The level of destruction is immense, with around half of the population no longer having homes to return to. Palestinians face starvation and the systematic destruction of almost all means of life

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(amongst others, Msuya 2024). Whilst the scale of Israel's ongoing violence is unprecedented, it must be understood as part of Israel's broader settler colonial project and the inherent logics of erasure (Wolfe 2006) that underpin it.

We were motivated to put together this Conversations Section because of the striking silence amongst many Western feminists, including leading academics in the field, in the face of their respective governments' support for Israel's genocidal violence over the past year.<sup>1</sup> This silence is especially troubling when contrasted with feminism's historical commitment to justice and human rights. In some cases, Western feminists have even echoed Israel's atrocity propaganda by amplifying allegations of Hamas rapes, whilst ignoring the well-documented Israeli sexual violence and torture against Palestinian women and men, not to mention the reproductive violence or 'reprocide' that is part of Israel's genocidal strategy. This complicity is not new. Feminist scholars and activists from the Global South and feminists of color have long documented how Western feminist has been entangled with colonialism and imperialism. The interventions presented here originated from roundtable discussions that we organized during the annual conferences of the British International Studies Association (BISA) and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) in the summer of 2024. These discussions aimed to demonstrate why Palestine is a feminist issue and to challenge the complicity of mainstream feminist frameworks in systems of oppression.

This collection of articles here aims to confront the silences and complicities within feminism, urging scholars and activists to reassess the global impacts of colonial violence and reaffirm

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8 their commitment to justice and human dignity. By bringing together Palestinian feminist  
9 scholars and feminists from across the Middle East, we seek to inspire accountability and  
10 solidarity within the feminist movement. Bearing witness to the genocide in Gaza and the  
11 broader Palestinian struggle requires feminists, particularly in the West, to speak out, take  
12 action, and challenge the systems that perpetuate oppression and dispossession. Genuine  
13 solidarity demands rejecting colonial narratives that prioritize certain lives over others and  
14 addressing the racialized biases embedded within feminist frameworks. By centering  
15 Palestinian voices and experiences, feminism can move toward a truly inclusive movement that  
16 upholds the dignity and rights of all people.  
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9 **Coloniality-Toxified Feminism: The Nakba's Lingering Shadow**

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12 Afaf Jabiri, University of East London, [A.Jabiri@uel.ac.uk](mailto:A.Jabiri@uel.ac.uk)

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15 In late December, I began undergoing tests for breast cancer. At that time, I did not know  
16 whether I had cancer or, if I did, how severe it might be. Thinking about my own life during a  
17 genocide felt selfish when all around me was the death and destruction of my people.

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19 However, one idea sustained me: I am one of those lucky Palestinians who, perhaps by mere  
20 moral luck, if I use Bernard Williams's term (1981), came to exist in the first place.

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22 Reflecting on my existence as a stroke of moral luck, an accident, I realize there were many  
23 occasions that could have led to my non-existence, one occasion, which I give here as an  
24 example, was In 1949, during the Jewish militant Hagana's 10 months siege, blockade, and  
25 heavy bombardment of my hometown, Iraq Al-Manshiyya, just 32 kilometers from Gaza, the  
26 room where my mother and her cousin Halima were sleeping was targeted by an airstrike.  
27 Halima was hit directly and cut into pieces; my mother, only a few meters away, survived. If she  
28 had not, I would never have been born.

29  
30 This personal history reflects a broader reality: the losses we mourn are not only those who  
31 were martyred, but also the countless lives never lived, those who were never lucky enough to  
32 be born. This brings us to a crucial question: how do we reckon with the loss of potential and  
33 future? When settler colonialism threatens both the potential and future, and if feminism must  
34 confront the pressing issues of our time in order to shape a better future, Palestine becomes  
35 not only a feminist issue but a defining issue for feminism.

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***Gendering Without Context: The Dangers of Depoliticization***

Feminism's complicity with the settler-colonial Zionist project in Palestine predates the current genocide. In my latest book, *Palestinian Refugee Women from Syria to Jordan: Decolonising the Geopolitics of Displacement*, I highlight how Palestinian refugee women from Syria remain invisible in feminist literature on gender and the Syrian refugee questions. Most of the literature I reviewed overlooks their specific experiences, with some offering only brief mentions of Palestinians, either as a footnote or in one sentence or two. Even in avowedly decolonial feminist works, such as McLaren 2017, Palestine is erased, particularly in the chapter on refugee women, where its absence is glaring. This reveals that decolonial feminist discourse still fails to move beyond a colonial mindset regarding Palestine, remaining far from decolonization.

For far too long, the term "feminism" has been thrown around loosely, allowing anyone to claim the label without truly committing to its principles. Despite efforts to categorize feminism into different types like liberal, western, white, or postcolonial, the reality is that feminism has become a mixed bag, like a salad bowl, but amidst the salad diversity, there are certain key ingredients that shape its taste and appearance. That is not the case for feminism, when its two main principles, equality and justice, are interpreted differently, or not equally applied to all.

Witnessing feminists' hesitation to take a clear position, their confusion over how to deal with the ongoing genocide, or their deafening silence, or even complicity (as highlighted by Maryam Aldossari in her contribution here), demonstrates that feminism remains inherently and in a complex way entangled with colonial legacies and new forms of imperialism.



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In specific historical moments, the connection between different oppressive forces becomes unmistakable, which offers an opportunity for feminists to assert their analyses of intersectionality beyond classrooms and academic literature. The unconditional support of Western states and their allies for the genocidal war on Palestinians, which coincides with the rise of far-right movements in Europe and other parts of the world, makes it imperative for feminists to recognize and act upon the interconnectedness of these oppressive systems.

However, this is not yet the case. On Sunday, 22 June 2024, feminist movements from all around France took to the streets to protest the rise of far-right political parties. Yet, nowhere in these demonstrations did we see a Palestinian flag or a call to end the genocide. The protest was prompted by the fear of losing women's gains and rights. When these rights are seen as inseparable from what's happening in other parts of the world, feminists are not only co-opted by neoliberal politics but also repeating the same mistakes of early feminist generations, which included fragmentation of the struggles, complicity with colonialism and exclusionary practices, and prioritization of issues and concern only relevant to white women.

Such a selectivity and prioritization of issues, which can be seen clearly in some subject choices for feminists during a genocide, as bell hooks argues, clearly speak to the question of how the subject can be represented and disguised at the same time by what, she calls the 'oppressive talk' (Hooks 1990, 151), where there is a speech about the subject, but gaps are hidden in that talk.

One clear example of how oppressive narratives operate, particularly during a genocide, is the statement by *Feminist Dissent*, on April 16, 2024 (Feminist Dissent 2024). The statement begins

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with the strongest possible condemnation of the events of October 7 and addresses the use of Israeli women's bodies as weapons of war. On the other hand, it acknowledges settler colonialism in Palestine in an abstract, theoretical manner without explicitly addressing how it impacts Palestinian women's lives. More dangerously, it chooses to focus on issues related to religion and culture when discussing Palestinian women. To reinforce its point about allegations of widespread sexual violence during October 7—claims which, at the time of the statement, had been debunked by several reports with no survivors coming forward to confirm them—the statement decontextualizes and depoliticizes the emergence of Hamas. It also validates sexual allegations against settler Jewish-Israeli women at the expense of women who are exposed to the structural violence of settler colonialism, who have been killed in large numbers by settler colonial military forces at the time of writing their statement.

By drawing a comparison between colonizer and colonized women, the statement implies that the real danger lies with Islamism and fundamentalism rather than settler colonialism, apartheid, and occupation. But although mentioning fundamentalism, it chooses to only name Islamic fundamentalism, not Jewish fundamentalism, the ideology that is directly connected to settler colonialism and hence more dangerous in the context of Palestine as it has been used to justify the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, the supremacy of Jews over Palestinians and the continuous dispossession of Palestinian lands and lives for the last 76 years.

The statement cites statistics from a 2019 report about women killed in so-called honor killings in Gaza but fails to reference a more recent UN report from January that states “two mothers

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are killed every hour in Gaza” (UN Women 2024). This selectivity and the type of rhetoric used in the Feminist Dissent statement, given here as an example, highlight a critical issue within feminism: what determines the choices we make in presenting issues and priorities, and whose voices are represented while we do so? When does gender matter first and when is gender just one category of many, and not necessarily the first that should be addressed. As Ashjan Ajour argues in her contribution here, “Effective feminist solidarity must recognize that Palestinian women’s experiences are shaped not only by gender but by the intersecting forces of colonialism, nationalism, and racism”.

#### ***Nakba 1948 and the unsettled practice of feminism***

In my aforementioned book, I examine the Nakba of 1948 as a critical juncture in history. Framing the Nakba in this way moves beyond seeing it as merely an expression or experience of Palestinians. Instead, it is a watershed moment, pivotal in analyzing its profound and ongoing impact on global politics. The Nakba was not just a historic event but one that shaped the post-World War II world—a world that declared the end of war and the dawn of the human rights era yet left Palestine outside its parameters. By placing Palestine under a settler-colonial project, Palestine became the link between old and new forms of colonialism.

The critical question here is where does feminism stand in this context? The current genocide in Gaza underscores the enduring legacy of Western racism and colonialism through the ongoing Nakba. The hesitation or reluctance of many feminists to take a decisive stance from the outset of this genocidal war—some only speaking out when Palestinian losses triggered a humanitarian response—is not merely a momentary uncertainty. This silence, complicity, and

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selective attention to certain issues among feminists are deeply rooted in an acceptance of the post-WWII world order and an entanglement with capitalism and neoliberal politics, both within and beyond academia.

While feminists have made theoretical strides in challenging colonialism, nationalism, white supremacy, and racism, the responses to the genocide in Gaza expose a troubling gap between theory and action. If Palestine represents the continuation of Western colonialism through the settler colonial project, this disjunction in feminist praxis underscores the dangers of a feminism that accepts and shields this continuity from critique. This form of feminism, lacking a clear label but present across various strands, can be described as *coloniality-toxified feminism*.

Coloniality-toxified feminism reflects an unsettled practice that exists across various feminist frameworks. It is characterized by a tension with decolonial feminist principles, as this type of feminism inadvertently not only reproduces colonial power dynamics but enables the oppressor to uphold power over the oppressed. The reluctance to confront settler colonialism's anti-Palestinian rhetoric, neutrality or silence in the face of genocide—especially when contrasted with feminist approaches to other forms of oppression—underscores how deeply entrenched colonial attitudes remain amongst many feminists, the degree to which they are complicit in the ongoing genocide and how profoundly they are contributing to the silencing of Palestinian voices.

The failure of decolonial and post-colonial feminist frameworks to adequately address Palestine stems from a deeper issue: feminisms have accepted a global order that is built on the ruins of Palestinians. The ethos of human rights, equality, and democracy, as celebrated in many

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8 Western feminist movements, have been constructed on the exclusion and erasure of  
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10 Palestinian lives.

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13 What is urgently needed is a *de-toxified feminism*—one that not only challenges coloniality but  
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15 also refuses to normalize or justify its violent legacies. A feminism that confronts the ongoing  
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17 settler-colonialism in Palestine and can no longer remain silent or complicit. A truly decolonial,  
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19 antiracist and anti-capitalist feminism is needed—one that resists the forces of neoliberalism  
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21 and colonial legacies, standing firmly against all forms of oppression, including the colonial  
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23 genocidal violence against Palestinians that we are witnessing today.  
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### 20 21 22 23 **From Sympathy to Feminist Solidarity with Palestinian Women facing Genocide**

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25  
26 Ashjan Ajour, Birmingham City University, [ashjan.ajour@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:ashjan.ajour@bcu.ac.uk)

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29 In this article, I argue that Palestinian women need feminist solidarity not merely sympathy.  
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31 Previously, I have written about my family, who, like many others, endure the Israeli  
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33 bombardment and forced displacement as a continuation of a longer historical dispossession of  
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35 Palestinians since 1948 (Ajour 2023). I described the suffering caused by the genocidal violence,  
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37 blockade, destruction of hospitals and lack of medical supplies, in effect turning Gaza into a  
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39 concentration camp.

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42 My family's experiences – the destruction of our home, multiple displacement, the constant  
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44 threat to their lives under bombardment – are the reasons why I seek something deeper than  
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46 sympathy from feminist Western allies. In another article that I wrote (Ajour 2024), I described  
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48 my frustration with people simply offering sympathy. Words of sympathy, while  
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50 compassionate, fail to have any impact on the structural forces perpetuating our suffering. Real  
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52 solidarity requires actively opposing systems that enable violence against Palestinians. It must  
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question political agendas, resist colonial narratives and call for justice over geopolitical interests.

Western feminists need to understand the historical context of Palestinian oppression to engage in meaningful solidarity, particularly when considering the events since 7 October 2023.

This historical context is Israel's decades-long settler colonial project, which includes the oppression of Palestinians and their ethnic cleansing. A failure to contextualize the genocide in Gaza against this historical context of Palestinian oppression leads to dehumanizing Palestinians, stripping their suffering from its roots, without recognizing the ongoing dispossession and resistance to it.

The roots of the current violence lie in the Nakba of 1948, a mass displacement that uprooted over 750,000 Palestinians. This colonial violence is inherently gendered, targeting women as the social and cultural anchors within Palestinian society. For Palestinian women, Israel's colonization involves a cycle of displacement and violence that profoundly affects every dimension of life including gender roles and family structures. The 17-year blockade of Gaza, cutting off access to food, water and medical care, is an illustration of colonial repression which falls heavily on Palestinian women.

In reflecting on the politics of feminist solidarity in response to the genocide and suffering in Gaza, it is necessary to address the challenges Palestinian women face, both from Israeli violence and the limitations of feminist solidarity in the West. Palestinian women ask why their appeal for global support is largely met by indifference. How then can Western feminist solidarity address their suffering?

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***The importance of moving beyond sympathy***

Feminist solidarity can operate as a powerful form of resistance against the colonial violence faced by Palestinian women. While statements of support or condemnation are important, they often lack the depth and intersectional analysis failing to challenge the power structures that continue to oppress Palestinians. Real solidarity requires taking a clear stance against the systems that perpetuate Palestinian suffering which may involve challenging Western media narratives that often frame the Israeli colonial state as the victim. In some cases, the empathy and compassion expressed for Israeli women fails to extend to Palestinian women who face an intensive level of genocidal violence.

Solidarity must be informed by a real understanding of the Palestinian struggle and accompanied by tangible efforts to change practices and policies that sustain colonial violence. Expressions of sympathy alone without actions do little to improve the conditions on the ground for Palestinian women and fail to recognize the agency of Palestinian women who have a long history of resisting this violence. Palestinian women don't only need statements of sympathy, they need feminists to take a clear political stance and actions that address the colonial framework sustaining their suffering. The path toward feminist solidarity involves tangible actions, such as forming alliances with Palestinian anticolonial feminist activists to ensure their voices are heard and their experiences acknowledged in discussions of international feminism, allowing Palestinian women to speak directly to their experiences and the change they need.

***The gendered nature of colonial violence and intersectional feminism***



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Effective feminist solidarity must recognize that Palestinian women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but by the intersecting forces of colonialism, nationalism, and racism. This Intersectionality reveals multiple forms of oppression which overlap and compound each other creating a distinctive gendered oppression. For Palestinian women, this plays out not just as the physical dangers of war and mass death due to bombardment but also by the gender specific harms and deprivation of maternal care, shortage of feminine hygiene products, the unsafe conditions of shelters and the increased burdens of caregiving. Hospitals in Gaza have been targeted and destroyed by Israeli attacks, creating terrifying environments for women who need medical assistance especially when giving birth or dealing with chronic illnesses. This is a clear example of reproductive violence or 'reproicide', which not only endangers women but also prevents the birth of future generations, as elaborated by Hala Shoman in her contribution.

Israeli genocidal violence - from killing women and children to restricted movement and limited access to healthcare and resources - renders Gaza unlivable and creates conditions of gendered suffering unique to women who are overwhelmingly the primary caregivers burdened by these circumstances. By failing to recognize this context, sympathy alone risks further dehumanizing women through making it appear as if our suffering is inevitable rather than as a result of structural colonial violence perpetrated by imperial western power that supports Israel.

Recognizing this intersectionality then, is crucial to creating feminist solidarity.

### ***Challenging geopolitical agendas and selective compassion***

Western feminism is often hesitant to confront the realities of Palestine due to geopolitical tensions and political alliances or the fear of being accused of antisemitism. This reluctance to

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take a clear stance over Palestine reflects a selective compassion that compromises the core principles of feminisms. True feminist solidarity cannot waver based on geopolitical considerations, particularly when the suffering of women in Gaza is so clearly rooted in systematic oppression.

There is clearly a double standard in play that undermines the moral foundation of feminist principles when Western feminist movements readily condemn the violence against Israeli women on 7 October 2023 but remain silent on the violence inflicted by Israel upon Palestinian women every day since (and before). As a feminist movement that aims to address all forms of injustice, Western feminism cannot afford to ignore or minimize the suffering of Palestinian women. This selective empathy dehumanizes Palestinian women and implicitly aligns with colonial narratives that dismiss their suffering as secondary or inevitable. This inconsistency not only reflects a failure to uphold feminist ideals of inclusivity and justice but also perpetuates stereotypes that contribute to the marginalization of Palestinian voices in the global conversation.

***Beyond sympathy: A feminist solidarity movement grounded in global justice***

Effective solidarity involves rejecting the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, a common and dangerous misconception that suppresses critical discussion about Israeli violence perpetrated against Palestinians. Feminist solidarity with Palestinian women requires feminist movements to ground their efforts in principles of justice. This means acknowledging that the fight for gender equality cannot be divorced from the broader fight against colonialism.

Western feminism must commit to dismantling structures of power that enable the oppression

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9 of women globally rather than allowing geopolitical interests to dictate which women deserve  
10 solidarity and which do not. Feminist movements have the potential to be powerful agents of  
11 change but only if they are willing to embrace global justice and avoid selective solidarity. By  
12 standing with Palestinian women and recognizing their suffering as part of a broader historical  
13 and political struggle, Western feminists can make a significant step toward a more effective  
14 feminism that honors women's resistance and agency everywhere.  
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21 In conclusion, solidarity with Palestinian women amidst the ongoing genocide in Gaza requires  
22 a comprehensive and action-oriented approach that respects their agency and dignity. Western  
23 feminism must critically assess their movement and ensure that solidarity goes beyond gestures  
24 of sympathy. By rooting their solidarity efforts in an understanding of colonial history,  
25 intersectionality and a commitment to global justice, feminists in the West can contribute to  
26 the fight for Palestinian liberation. This is a call for action, accountability and commitment to  
27 feminist standards - a global movement for justice honoring the agency and humanity of not  
28 just Palestinian women but all women.  
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For Peer Review

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## **Reproicide in Gaza: Testimonies of the Assault on Palestinian Reproductive Health during Israel's Genocide**

Hala Shoman, Newcastle University, [H.A.A.Shoman2@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:H.A.A.Shoman2@newcastle.ac.uk)

This contribution analyses Israeli reproductive violence in Gaza within the period of the ongoing genocide starting from October 2023. It draws on the concept of reproductive genocide, or reproicide, to describe Israel's violent tactics and strategies against women's and men's reproductive health within a settler colonial context, especially a genocide. Reproicide was first coined by Paynter (2022) and defined as the deliberate strategy to target population reproduction. Some of the examples mentioned are the forced sterilization of the Indigenous population, black people and prisoners (Paynter, 2022). Reproductive violence is a common technique used by colonizing powers against colonized communities. European settlers in North America weaponized reproductive health violence as a colonial strategy for land acquisition, expansion and ethnic cleansing. In Bangladesh, former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, reproductive violence was weaponized as part of a genocidal strategy, utilizing rape and forced impregnation to displace and assert control over the oppressed population. The events of reproductive violence unfolding in Gaza are not new, they are a continuation and exacerbation of longstanding policies of the Israeli settler colonial occupation in their demographic battle against the Palestinians. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) elaborates how Israeli biopolitical and geopolitical restrictions affect reproductive health and inflict severe violence against birthing women residing in East Jerusalem. Similarly, in the West Bank, Palestinian reproductive health is endangered through Israeli-imposed curfews and checkpoints (Wick, 2010, Ladadwa

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and Nasr, 2022). Meanwhile, Palestinians in 1948 areas<sup>1</sup> are subject to multiple measures and strategies to control, violate and surveil Palestinian reproductive health in light of the Israeli state's concern to maintain Jewish demographic supremacy, viewing the higher birth rates of the Palestinian population as a 'demographic time bomb' (Kanaaneh, 2002). This genocidal strategy views Palestinian existence as a demographic threat and employs direct violence and indirect health barriers to suppress reproduction, especially in Gaza. It underlines the need for an intersectional feminist approach, which is attentive to colonialism in producing gendered oppression, as argued by Ashjan Ajour in her intervention here.

This study is based on autoethnographic accounts and first-hand testimonies from Gaza. As an activist and a Palestinian from Gaza, who lived in Gaza until just a few days before the genocide began, and only left in order to finish writing up my PhD thesis, I am known and trusted by the community, and many reached out to me asking me to share their experiences widely and alert the world to the violence that they are facing. My network provided unique access to stories showcasing the lived impact of reprocide on Palestinians' lives. Here there is space to highlight only the main findings from people's testimonies.

### ***Preventing the birth of future generations***

Since 7 October 2023, Israel has murdered at least 50,000 Palestinians in Gaza (including those whose bodies remain buried under the rubble), 17,000 of whom are children. On 24 June 2024, Save the Children reported that 21,000 children were missing; their destiny is still unclear but could include being kidnapped by the Israeli occupation forces, whilst others remain

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8 undetected beneath the rubble, buried in unmarked graves or separated from their parents  
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10 during the continuous forced displacement (Save The Children, 2024b). This number is expected  
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12 to be way higher as mentioned by Khatib et al. (2024) in an article published in the Lancet in  
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14 July, which estimated that at least 186,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza in direct and  
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16 indirect ways.  
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19 According to Dr Mohammed Saqr, media spokesperson for Nasser Medical Complex in Khan  
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21 Younis (BERNAMA, 2024):  
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24 As medical teams, with the scarcity of medical supplies in emergency  
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26 departments, we are now focusing on saving children and women to  
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28 preserve the Palestinian lineage in Gaza.  
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31 Palestinians perceive the direct attacks on women and children - and also on men – as a clear  
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33 intention to annihilate them and eradicate whole Palestinian lineages. Indeed, since 7 October  
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35 2023, the Israeli genocide has wiped out more than 900 Palestinian families in Gaza from the  
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37 civil registry (Aljazeera, 2024). Many more thousands have only one or two surviving family  
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39 members.  
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42 Another element of the reprocide is clear with the intentional targeting of the embryos -  
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44 'extrauterine children'- murdering over 4,000 of them in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza's largest  
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46 fertility center, Albasma IVF Centre (Mahdawi, 2024). In the same bombardment, some 1,000  
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48 specimens of sperm and unfertilized eggs were destroyed. Hence, Palestinian lives and those  
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50 expected lives are both targeted by the Israeli machine as part of the intentional reprocide.  
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8 More than 177,000 women experience life-threatening health risks, among them non-  
9 communicable diseases, hunger and malnutrition during pregnancy (UN WOMEN, 2024), which  
10 threaten their unborn babies. According to the United Nations, about 50,000 women in Gaza  
11 were pregnant at the beginning of the genocide. Every day, about 183 women give birth and at  
12 least 15% of them face complications (WHO, 2023). Moreover, the ongoing genocide created a  
13 challenging atmosphere for pregnant women to keep their pregnancies safe. The miscarriage  
14 rate jumped by 300% to unprecedented levels in the first few months (Axelson and  
15 Venkatraman, 2024). Many women have been forced to have C-sections without anesthetic,  
16 sterilization or after-delivery painkillers or antibiotics (Islamic Relief, 2024; TRT WORLD, 2023).  
17 All of those factors affect and will continue to affect reproductive health massively in the long  
18 term.  
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### ***Risks to Reproductive Health as a Result of Environmental and Hygienic Violations***

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32 Reproductive health is further enhanced with deliberate environmental deprivation. Israel's strict  
33 blockade and restrictions on clean water, sanitary products and hygiene facilities increase  
34 women's and girls' infections, directly impacting their reproductive health. Women and girls are  
35 lacking period and postpartum products, affecting their health and dignity. They are forced to  
36 improvise from pieces of tent fabric and cloth to replace period pads, using them most of the  
37 day or washing and reusing them (Saleh, 2024). All of this has resulted in Urinary Tract  
38 Infections (UTIs) becoming prevalent. Moreover, thousands are staying in unsanitary shelters or  
39 tents with difficulties to access water, also endangering their general health and reproductive  
40 health.  
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## ***Risks to Reproductive and Maternal Health as a Result of the Destruction of Healthcare***

### ***Infrastructure***

Israeli forces have systematically targeted civilian infrastructure. Graham (2005) calls this strategy “switching-off cities”, meaning, in this context, an intentional strategy to make Gaza unlivable. It can be understood as a strategy of ‘bomb now, die later’, which relies on causing mass destruction of infrastructure and forced displacement of people, depriving people of their basic needs. The resulting conditions lead to illnesses and death from disease and deprivation rather than direct bombing.

Israeli attacks on healthcare infrastructures, including hospitals, maternity wards, and emergency rooms, restrict women's access to essential healthcare and affect their reproductive health. With approximately 84 percent of healthcare facilities damaged or destroyed, the remaining facilities are barely operational, lacking medications, medical staff, ambulances, electricity, and water, and struggling to provide even basic emergency care (UN WOMEN, 2024). These conditions have led to the spread of infectious diseases that pose extreme risks to pregnant and lactating women. Moreover, the World Health Organization has reported unprecedented levels of starvation in Gaza (WHO, 2023; BBC-News, 2024). Children, babies, and infants are especially vulnerable to this forced starvation. At least 34 people, most of them children, have died or are now on the brink of death due to intentional starvation (Save the Children, 2024a).

### ***Sexual Violence as a Tool of Repricide***

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8 Many reports coming from Israeli detention centers reveal the use of sexual violence against  
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10 Palestinian detainees, including women, men and children, by Israeli soldiers. Those violations  
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12 include rape and other forms of sexual assault, such as, stripping Palestinians to shame them  
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14 and denying women their reproductive dignity. Rape, sexual abuse and assaults not only result  
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16 in immediate and direct harm and trauma but also have long-term effects on reproductive and  
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18 mental health.  
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21 Palestinian voices from Gaza highlight the significance of reprocide within the ongoing Israeli  
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23 genocide, which aims at erasing the Palestinian people by targeting their reproductive capacity.  
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25 Many international efforts and actions are needed to expose this form of violence, which  
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27 adopts reproductive control as a tool of annihilation. Reprocide in Gaza demands a reevaluation  
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29 of global approaches to genocide, reproductive rights, and the rights of colonized populations.  
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31 Importantly, the question of reprocide urgently highlights the need for feminist solidarity not  
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33 sympathy, as discussed by Ashjan Ajour.  
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<sup>1</sup> Between 1947 and 1949, Zionist forces captured more than 78 percent of historic Palestine, ethnically cleansing and destroying about 530 villages and cities, and killing some 15,000 Palestinians in a series of mass atrocities, including more than 70 massacres. At least 750,000 Palestinians, from a population of 1.9 million in historical Palestine, were forcibly displaced beyond the borders of the newly established Israeli state. Those Palestinians who stayed in the 1948 areas after the Israeli settler colonial occupation were later given Israeli citizenship.

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## Imperial Feminism and Selective Outrage

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As many of the contributors to this *Conversations Section* highlight, the current crisis in Gaza reveals the limitations and biases within many Western feminist frameworks, which frequently align with imperialist and colonialist agendas. For over seventy-five years, Palestinians have faced violence, displacement, and systemic erasure under Israeli occupation, yet feminist responses have often been selective, overlooking the experiences of Palestinian women, men, and children. This selective support reveals a brand of feminism that, while vocal on certain issues of violence, remains silent—or even complicit—in others, particularly when the perpetrators are Western-aligned powers.

Since the start of the war, the Western media has consistently depicted Israel as a “civilized democracy” surrounded by “backward” Arab nations, perpetuating a racialized narrative that dehumanizes Palestinians. This framing shapes discussions of violence in Gaza, often justifying Israel’s actions as those of a developed state “defending itself” against a supposedly “uncivilized” adversary. Such biased portrayals parallel the silence of some feminist organizations and scholars, who are ordinarily outspoken on violence against women but have remained notably quiet about the atrocities faced by Palestinian women and children. This silence reflects what Amos and Parmar (1984) describe as “imperial feminism”— feminism that prioritizes Euro-American perspectives while excluding the voices and experiences of Black and Third World women.

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Imperial feminism has a long history of engaging selectively with issues that align with Western political goals, often marginalizing the perspectives of women from the Global South. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) critiques this model of feminism for its failure to account for the impact of colonial histories and geopolitical allegiances on the lives of non-Western women. For example, during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Western feminists widely supported campaigns framed around "saving" Afghan women from the Taliban's oppressive regime. However, as Ann Russo (2006) notes, this support often disregarded the historical role of Western powers in destabilizing the region, as well as the complex socio-political realities faced by Afghan women. Western intervention in Afghanistan resembled past imperialist "rescue" missions, where Western colonialism was justified under the rhetoric of "liberating" women from oppressive societies (Ahmed, 2021; Russo, 2006).

### ***The weaponization of sexual violence narratives***

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Western feminist scholars have consistently condemned sexual violence in numerous conflicts (Baaz & Stern, 2018; Mackenzie, 2010). However, there is minimal engagement with the well-documented instances of sexual violence committed by Israeli forces against Palestinian detainees. Human rights organizations—including the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, the Jerusalem-based Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, and B'Tselem—alongside various UN bodies, have, for years, released substantial documentation on violence against Palestinian women and children, long predating the events of 7 October 2023. Drawing from evidence such as legal proceedings, formal complaints, lawyer documentation, and detainee testimonies, these reports collectively reveal a pattern of systematic sexual violence,

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torture, and other severe abuses inflicted on Palestinians in Israeli detention facilities. Recent United Nations reports further underscore the scale and persistence of these abuses. In February 2024, UN special rapporteurs presented findings of sexual assault against Palestinian women and girls in detention, including incidents of rape and other degrading treatment. Similarly, an October 2024 report from the UN Commission of Inquiry described the widespread occurrence of sexual and gender-based violence against thousands of Palestinian detainees, adults and children, and classified these abuses as war crimes.

Despite extensive documentation of abuses, many Western feminist scholars and organizations focus on condemning wartime sexual violence in other contexts while largely neglecting the well-documented and systematic sexual violence inflicted upon Palestinian detainees by Israeli occupation forces. This selective focus exposes a racialized bias within imperial feminism, whereby the suffering of non-Western women receives attention primarily when it aligns with Western political agendas (Russo, 2006). This approach reflects a failure of relational solidarity, which demands understanding the specific contexts of oppression rather than applying a generalized, universal narrative. Instead of engaging meaningfully with the unique struggles of Palestinian women, Western feminist movements often perpetuate an Orientalist framing that portrays these women as victims of their own society, a perspective that denies their agency and dehumanizes Palestinian men, casting them as perpetual aggressors.

As Leila Ahmed (2021) observes, such narratives are deeply rooted in colonial ideologies, where colonial powers portrayed Muslim women as passive victims in need of Western intervention, effectively obscuring the colonial structures that perpetuated their oppression. This failure to



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acknowledge and engage with local struggles represents an imperialist form of feminism that prioritizes Western values over genuine solidarity, reducing complex issues to fit within Western frameworks. Moreover, the framework of “humanitarian warfare” allows Israel to maintain an image as a progressive democracy, obscuring the racialized and sexual violence intrinsic to its settler colonial project. This construction positions Israel as a “moral” actor, engaging in warfare as a defense against “terrorist” threats, and thereby conceals the sexualized violence embedded in its occupation practices (Medien, 2021). This narrative reinforces the imperial feminist logic that locates such violence within “illiberal” societies while masking systematic abuses within a liberal, rights-oriented environment, thus facilitating Western feminist complicity in these oppressive structures. As Anderl (2022) argues, true solidarity requires transcending this imperialist approach to instead build relationships rooted in mutual respect and specificity rather than a monolithic “global” sisterhood.

### ***Toward a decolonial feminist framework***

To effectively address these biases, Western feminists must adopt a decolonial feminist framework that centers the voices and lived experiences of those enduring occupation. Such a framework actively challenges dominant narratives, fostering an inclusive movement that seeks to dismantle rather than reinforce hierarchical structures of power. A decolonial approach rejects the imperialist tendency to view Palestinian women solely as victims in need of rescue, affirming instead their agency and resilience in the face of colonial violence. This approach is exemplified by Hala Shoman’s use, here, of personal testimonies and autoethnography, which centers the lived experiences of Palestinian women, while drawing attention to the

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8 reproductive violence they endure under occupation. Her work provides a practical model of  
9 feminist solidarity rooted in justice and solidarity, supporting those who face systemic violence  
10 and erasure, in opposition to colonial powers.  
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15 For Western feminists, embracing a decolonial feminist framework requires interrogating their  
16 own positionality and confronting the biases that have long shaped their perspectives. The  
17 ongoing genocide in Gaza and the broader struggle of Palestinians under occupation serve as an  
18 urgent call to action for feminist scholars everywhere. True solidarity demands a rejection of  
19 imperialist narratives that prioritize certain lives over others and a commitment to confronting  
20 the racialized biases embedded within feminist frameworks. By centering the experiences of  
21 Palestinian women and men within feminist discourse, we can begin to dismantle the  
22 structures of imperial feminism and work toward a movement that upholds the dignity,  
23 humanity, and rights of all people.  
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## **Palestinian Liberation is a Feminist Issue: Lessons about Global Majority Feminism from the Palestinian Women's Struggle**

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Since the 1950s majority world feminists have emphasized the inseparable connection between national liberation and women's liberation (Roy 2016; Sadiqi 2016). Palestinian feminist thought has been an important part of this wider anti-colonial liberationist feminist framework (amongst others, Kuttab 2012; Tucker 2000; Curry 2021; Saba 2023; Stagni 2024). Yet, as several contributors to this collection argue, there has been a troubling feminist silence regarding the Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine and, more recently, the Israeli genocide in Gaza. This failure to recognize the feminist significance of Palestine represents a crisis in feminist thought. It stems from the inability of some feminists to incorporate the insights of majority world anti-colonial feminists into their feminist common sense, resulting in what Afaf Jabiri calls here "coloniality-toxified feminism". Whilst Maryam Aldossari calls here for a decolonial feminist framework, I draw attention to the work and writings of Palestinian revolutionary and women's right's organizer May al-Sayegh (1940-2023). Like many other feminists in the Global South of her time, al-Sayegh was not merely 'decolonial' but explicitly anti-colonial, arguing that national liberation must be at the center of the feminist struggle. Despite her important contributions to feminist thought and the question of Palestine, al-Sayegh's work remains a neglected voice that deserves greater recognition.

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May al-Sayegh was born in Gaza in 1940 to a Palestinian Christian Arab nationalist family.<sup>1</sup> Her early memories revolve around following her mother, a founding member of the women's group of *Usbat al Taharur al Watani*,<sup>2</sup> to demonstrations and refugee camps.<sup>3</sup> Al-Sayegh believed that Palestine as a whole must be liberated and was an inseparable part of the Arab world. Initially al-Sayegh joined the Arab Baath party, going to its meetings while she was studying Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Cairo. However, after the defeat of 1967 al-Sayegh, like so many other Palestinians, concluded that the liberation of Palestine would not be achieved through Arab armies but only through Palestinian popular armed resistance. It was then that she started looking for political groups that shared her vision. By that time, she had been forced to move to Jordan where she was invited to join Fatah (al-Sayegh 2011, 1). Shortly afterwards she joined the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) under the leadership of Issam Abd al-Hadi. Al-Sayegh was elected head of the cultural committee due to her activism in Palestinian refugee camps (al-Sayegh 2011, 3).

Al-Sayegh's praxis and intellectual work focused on national and women's liberation, both in Palestinian communities and in international women's organizations. Her leftist ideology consistently informed her own praxis. For al-Sayegh, like other anti-colonial feminists, theory and praxis were inseparable. Recognizing that most Palestinian women could not afford to pay the ten Jordanian Dinar fee to join the GUPW, al-Sayegh told those interested in joining that the fee was 10 pennies, resulting in a significant increase in applications (al-Sayegh 2011, 3).

Al-Sayegh consistently drew on leftist ideology and global revolutionary praxis. In one instance, al-Sayegh heard of a woman who was beaten by her husband every time she came to a GUPW

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8 meeting. Al-Sayegh called the husband of this woman and told him that in Vietnam when a  
9 husband prevents his wife from joining the Vietnamese Revolution, the other women beat him  
10 up on the street. That was enough to keep this man from ever laying a hand on his wife again.<sup>4</sup>  
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12 Furthermore, al-Sayegh and the GUPW established reading circles in which women would read  
13 about the Algerian and Vietnamese revolution and learn from the strategies used there (al-  
14 Sayegh 2011, 4).  
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21 While engaged in the wider struggle to liberate Palestine, al-Sayegh was also active in fighting  
22 for gender equality within the liberation movement. A major struggle between the GUPW and  
23 the PLO leadership concerned the role of women in the revolution. Al-Sayegh believed that for  
24 the leadership “women were a complimentary part of the struggle, not a primary one” (2011,  
25 5). Al-Sayegh, together with other GUPW members, fought for the inclusion of women in  
26 Fateh’s decision-making committees (2011, 6). Believing in the necessity of popular armed  
27 resistance, al-Sayegh was instrumental in pushing Fateh to allow women to have military  
28 training, and to be armed. Her refusal to accept compromise and her outspoken nature often  
29 caused conflict with the Fateh leadership. This included her later criticisms of Fateh’s move to  
30 Tunisia in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war and her stance against the Oslo Peace Accord.  
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42 In the early 1970s, al-Sayegh was also active in international leftist circles. The Women's  
43 International Democratic Federation (WIDF) established in Paris in 1945 as an anti-fascist  
44 women’s organization was one of the fora in which al-Sayegh fought to build international  
45 feminist support for the question of Palestine. She challenged the fact that Palestine and other  
46 smaller nations had only observer status at the WIDF meetings in Berlin and, together with the  
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8 Cuban delegates, worked to change the bylaws of the Federation in order for it to reflect real  
9 international solidarity with colonized nations.<sup>5</sup> Together with other Third World activists, the  
10 Palestinian women's representatives were able to radically re-shape women's solidarity and  
11 create a new form of international women's activism. This activism was based on non-  
12 alignment, socialism, anti-colonialism and progressive feminist thought, distinct from current  
13 liberal forms of international feminism.  
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21 In addition to her praxis, al-Sayegh also produced important feminist writings underling the  
22 connection between national and women's liberation. According to al-Sayegh:  
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26 The liberation of Palestinian women is fundamentally connected to the struggle  
27 of oppressed classes and stopping discrimination of all sorts, be it based on  
28 religion, ethnicity or sex (al Sayegh, 1975).<sup>6</sup>  
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33 May al-Sayegh's booklet, entitled *The Arab and Palestinian Woman*, written circa 1975,<sup>7</sup> is an  
34 important text of national liberationist and feminist leftist thought. Al-Sayegh organizes the  
35 booklet according to two themes: 1) Arab liberation and 2) the struggle for the liberation of  
36 Palestine. She argues that national liberation has to be coupled with liberation from  
37 imperialism:  
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44 Arab resistance should not stop at liberating occupied Arab  
45 land. Resistance should go beyond national independence to  
46 also target imperial interest, stopping the partition of the  
47 Arab world, divisions based on sectarian, national and tribal  
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8 lines and fighting discrimination against women and the  
9 exploitation of humans by humans (al-Sayegh, 1975).  
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13 According to al-Sayegh and other Third World feminists, central to any liberation struggle is the  
14 struggle of women and all those who are socially oppressed. But likewise, central to the  
15 struggle for women's liberation is the struggle for national liberation. This text provides an  
16 important contribution to feminist writings on liberation struggles and the dilemma of what  
17 comes first: national or women's liberation? Centrally, al-Sayegh argues for the importance,  
18 and possibility, of coupling the liberation of 'the nation' with the liberation of women.  
19 Moreover, through their praxis, al-Sayegh and her comrades showed that national liberation  
20 can be an engine for women's liberation. Together with other women thinkers and activists of  
21 the Palestinian women's movement, such as Jihan al-Hilou and Khadija al-Habashneh, al-Sayegh  
22 challenged the dichotomy of national vs women's liberation through active women's  
23 organizing. More importantly, these writings hold valuable lessons about liberationist anti-  
24 colonial feminist thought.  
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27 Al-Sayegh's writings address the necessity of politicizing the struggle for women's liberation,  
28 seeing it as an outcome of structural change and not of the change of traditions and culture.  
29 For al-Sayegh, liberation must be total: not just national liberation, that is, the liberation of  
30 Palestine and the Arab world, but also include transformation to bring about equality between  
31 all humankind and social justice. Liberation thus entails more than political freedom from  
32 occupation. Al-Sayegh maintains that only by fighting all forms of oppression, including  
33 capitalist and feudal oppression, can true liberation materialize. The revolution is necessary not  
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8 only in Palestine but throughout the entire Arab world and by extension the rest of the world.

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10 For al-Sayegh, social justice and women's liberation are at the heart of national liberation.

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13 We are putting the question [of the liberation of women]<sup>8</sup> in its true context, the  
14 context of achieving general equality in rights between all peoples, in all  
15 countries for progress, democracy, social justice and national liberation.... The  
16 struggle to end humans oppressing other humans, be it for reasons of religion,  
17 sex or color, is a connected type of struggle. The liberation of women is  
18 connected to this struggle and the struggles against imperialism, racism and  
19 Zionism... In addition, the liberation of women cannot be separated from the  
20 liberation of oppressed people and ending oppression in all its forms (al-Sayegh,  
21 1975).  
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31 It is this holistic approach to women's struggle that makes al-Sayegh's work as essential today  
32 as it was in 1975. May al-Sayegh and her comrades worked to establish a feminism that is  
33 grounded in the experiences and praxis of women from the majority world. They did so in their  
34 own communities, in their daily struggle against Zionism and globally in international women's  
35 organizations. Their feminism was at its core an anti-colonial feminism that saw the women's  
36 question as an essential part of the international struggle for independence of all forms of  
37 oppressive structures (colonialism, patriarchy, racism, capitalism). Academic feminism that is  
38 distant from liberation struggles around the globe has failed to grasp one of the main elements  
39 of feminist thought: liberation. We need to go back to grounded theory that emerges from anti-  
40 colonial praxis to revive the anti-colonial feminist spirit. Once we follow this definition there is  
41 no question about the fact that Palestine is a feminist issue.  
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40 <sup>1</sup> May al-Sayegh, Interview with the author, Oraib Ajlan and Baida' Ababneh, Amman, 14 February  
41 2018.  
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43 <sup>2</sup> *Usbat al Taharur al Watani* split from the Communist Party of Palestine after the latter  
44 recognized the partition of Palestine in 1947.  
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48 <sup>3</sup> May al-Sayegh, interview with the author, Oraib Ajlan and Baida' Ababneh, Amman, 14  
49 February 2018.  
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52 <sup>4</sup> May al-Sayegh, interview with the author, Amman, 16 January 2018.  
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10 <sup>5</sup> May al-Sayegh, interview with the author, Amman, 16 January 2018.

11 <sup>6</sup> Selected quotes are translated by the author.

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13 <sup>7</sup> A previous translation exists of this text. While the name of the translator is not mentioned,  
14 the translation notes that the text was translated in 1981. In a private conversation with  
15 Khadija al-Habashneh and May al-Sayegh on 23 January 2018, al Habashneh maintained that  
16 the booklet was written after the 1975 UN conference on women. In the subsequent discussion  
17 both women agreed that this was the most likely date for this publication.  
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23 <sup>8</sup> Instead of using the singular 'woman,' which al-Sayegh uses in Arabic, I have translated *al-mar'a*  
24 as 'women,' in the plural.  
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