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## Palestinian Women in American Society: The Interaction of Social Class, Culture and Politics

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# Palestinian Women in American Society: The Interaction of Social Class, Culture, and Politics

*Louise Cainkar*

Research on the lives of female Arab immigrants in the United States is sorely lacking. Most studies of Arab immigrants have focussed on the lives and social and economic patterns of male members of these communities, although this focus usually went unstated (Cainkar 1988). The literature on Arab immigrants is not unique on this score. Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins* (1964) continues to be one of the most important theoretical works on immigrant adjustment, yet it is based almost exclusively on studies of male immigrants. This state of the literature is particularly disheartening in light of the fact that since 1930 women have dominated immigration to the United States (Houston, Kramer, and Barrett 1984). Indeed, the literature on immigrant communities, assimilation, and identity stresses the importance of primary groups and the ethnic community in reproducing ethnic culture, yet frequently omits the main actors in this reproductive work: women. The growth in studies of women and women as immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s has so far led to few changes in the main body of literature on immigrants. "Male bias has continued to persist," according to Mirjana Morokvasic, editor of *International*

*Migration Review's* special issue on *Women in Migration* (Morokvasic 1984). Unfortunately, this statement remains largely true in 1991.

This essay is part of a larger study of Palestinian immigrants in the United States which examined the relationships between gender, class, ethnicity, sociopolitical context, and the Palestinian immigrant experience. Gender was found to be a critical variable, determining patterns of daily life among Palestinian immigrants at least as much as class and ethnicity (Cainkar 1988). The daily lives of immigrant Palestinian women, the ways they interacted with the host society, and their level of public political involvement were clearly different from those of immigrant Palestinian men. And while it has been shown in studies of Arab immigrants in the United States that the sociopolitical context negatively affects Arab assimilation into U.S. culture and society,<sup>1</sup> I found that, at least among Palestinians, women bear more of the antiassimilation burden than men. That is, the strong ethos shared by Palestinian men and women in the United States "to keep Palestine alive" by maintaining a strong attachment to their native culture, perceived to be facing possible extinction, places more antiassimilation pressures on Palestinian women than on Palestinian men.

Ethnicity and gender are powerful determinants of the parameters of the daily lives of immigrants, but their effects are not uniform. After providing a general profile of Palestinian women immigrants in the United States, this essay looks at the effect of socioeconomic status on their lives, especially as it interacts with ethnicity. The profile, data, and conclusions are drawn primarily from my research on Palestinians and Palestinian Muslim women, both immigrant and U.S.-born children of immigrants, which was formally conducted between 1982 and 1986. Since then I have continued to conduct follow-up interviews in order to assess any changes that may have occurred over time. Formal data collection combined historical research, field work (participant and observation) in the community, and 150 fo-

1. Glaser noted in "The Dynamics of Ethnic Identification" that the process of assimilation is hindered by "experiences in America which make those who participate in them feel less than full Americans." Studies of Arab immigrants have shown that political events in the homeland (Zaghel 1977), U.S. policy toward Palestine (Elkholy 1966), political alienation and cultural differences (Kasees 1970), and a perception of living in forced exile (Stockton 1985) worked against the assimilation of Arab immigrants to U.S. culture and society.

cussed and 42 in-depth life history interviews with Palestinian Muslim women between the ages of nineteen and forty (born between 1942 and 1963). All of the interviews were conducted in English<sup>2</sup> and in the Chicago area. Single and married women were equally represented in the sample, as were women from different social classes. However, in order to produce a representative sample of the Chicago community (which reflects patterns evident in the United States as a whole), I sampled more heavily among persons from the Jerusalem/Ramallah area of Palestine, who greatly outnumber Palestinians from other regions. The Palestinian community in Chicago is estimated to be one of the four largest in the United States. It has numerous organizations and is characterized by class, educational, and ideological differences. It provides a balanced portrait of Palestinians in the United States since it is not skewed to overrepresent any one social class, regional, or occupational grouping of Palestinian immigrants to the United States. The discussion in this essay is confined to immigrant Palestinian women, to the exclusion of the U.S.-born and raised.<sup>3</sup>

## **Commonalities**

Palestinian women generally emigrate to the United States as the wives, daughters, or sisters of Palestinian men. Relatively few emigrate autonomously. This is not true for Palestinian men, who com-

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2. The necessity of conducting interviews in English put some bias into the sample, but how much is not clear. Among non-English-speaking Palestinian women, the majority are older women who would not have been interviewed anyhow because of age limitations on the sample. Women within the age group I studied tend to speak some English once living in the United States, but when they begin to do so varies according to their educational background, their access to U.S. citizens and whether they take a course here in English. English is taught in Palestinian schools beginning in late elementary school, although most Palestinians claim it is not sufficient training for living in an English-speaking country. Palestinian women who have had some college education in Palestine or another Arab country are better equipped in English. Most likely the sample is biased to exclude very recent immigrants (less than one year) and women who have absolutely no contact with Americans and who did not take a course in English while in the United States. My own estimation from extensive contact with the community is that this number is fairly small in the age group I studied.

3. The differences between immigrant Palestinian women and the U.S.-born and raised daughters of Palestinian immigrants are too large to be addressed here. See Cankar 1988, 1991.

monly emigrate autonomously for study or work, or to precede a family emigration. This pattern is not unique to Palestinians or Arabs. In fact, it is the most common pattern of immigration to the United States and reflects a near universal social relation of gender in patriarchally structured societies.<sup>4</sup> The attachment of female immigrants to families, a patriarchal practice, allows the family to continue exercising traditional patriarchal notions about women after immigration. This results in a different kind of immigration experience for women from that experienced by autonomous men, or men in general. It means that women may not be free to determine on their own how they will interact with their new host society. It also means that the roles women held in their families are likely to be carried over to their new environment, no matter how different this environment may be. In a community like the Palestinian, where maintaining traditional culture is politically extremely important due to statelessness, occupation, and diaspora and because this work of course must primarily be done in the home or in the confines of the community, women are under more pressure than men to be traditional and maintain traditional roles. Consequently, gender and politics interact to place a double burden of tradition keeping on Palestinian women.

Palestinian women immigrants, despite differences among them, share certain other characteristics. On the level of political values, it is difficult to find a Palestinian woman in the United States who is not deeply concerned over the stateless political status of the Palestinian people, along with the military violence and land confiscations occurring in Palestinian areas under Israeli occupation. Since the majority of Palestinian immigrants now in the United States come from the West Bank and have lived under such occupation, this is not surprising (Cainkar 1988). In addition, the vast majority of Palestinian women in the United States say they plan to return to Palestine if a Palestinian state is created. Whether this would in fact occur is a matter for speculation; but as long as return is not possible, as is presently the case, this stated goal significantly affects the Palestinian experience in the United States.

The sociological concept of the stranger was defined by Simmel (1921, 402) to describe persons with such an orientation: "the person who comes today and stays tomorrow . . . the potential wanderer."

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4. See Cainkar 1988 for a detailed discussion of gender and immigration patterns.



Bonacich (1973, 584) used the concept of sojourners to describe immigrants who do not plan to settle permanently and who keep alive an unusual attachment to the homeland and desire to return to it. Studies have shown that such immigrants tend to sustain a high degree of internal solidarity in their country of exile and shun lasting relationships with members of the host society. They strive to maintain strong ethnic ties "for these will persist in the future toward which the sojourner points" (ibid., 586). The future toward which the sojourner points is the homeland, thus social patterns incompatible with homeland culture should not be adopted. Sojourners also tend to occupy certain economic positions in the host society, that of middlemen between producer and consumer. That is, they tend to make a living in retail and wholesale goods and services. These attributes of strangers and sojourners quite neatly describe Palestinian immigrants in the United States.

On the level of social values, the majority of immigrant Palestinian women in the United States believe that certain values considered traditional in Western society form the backbone of their culture and deserve the highest respect. These include the primacy of the extended family, collective responsibility for kin, hospitality, respect for status superiors, and control of women's sexuality. Palestinians are not alone in subscribing to these values; they are currently found among other subcommunities in the United States, most often among immigrant communities from the so-called Third World.

## **Differences**

These values shared among Palestinian women immigrants in the United States are nonetheless *interpreted* differently by different subgroups within the community, which are largely determined by differences in social class. Gordon's (1964) concept of ethclass is useful in explaining why within an ethnic group characterized by a high degree of internal solidarity and shared values there exist diversities in behavioral patterns and interpretations of values. Within ethnic groups, persons have two types of identification that operate simultaneously: historical identification—a sense of peoplehood shared with other group members—and participational identification—a sense of primary identification with an ethnic group with whom one shares values and behavioral patterns. Primary relationships are normally confined

to persons who share both these identifications, persons of the same ethclass, since values and behavior tend to be related both by class and ethnicity. To be viewed by other Palestinians as ethnically appropriate, or properly Palestinian, it is important for Palestinian women to conform to the value interpretations and behaviors considered appropriate in their particular ethclass, or reference group. The opinions of other Palestinians are less important than these, for these are the ones that define them as members of the group, or, conversely, as ostracized persons.

Since Palestinian immigrants in the United States do not all belong to the same social class, the way they lead their lives is no more the same than the way lower-, middle-, and upper-class Americans—or Palestinians in Palestine of different social classes—lead their lives. Palestinians in the United States are clustered in the middle and lower classes. For the sake of analysis they can be divided into two major groupings: those in the middle and upper-middle class and those in the lower-middle and upper-lower class.<sup>5</sup> Each of these two groups shares certain demographic and historical characteristics which are key to both their class position and their interpretations of Palestinian values and culture in the United States. I found that urban versus rural origin does not predict class status or behavior patterns in the United States because most Palestinians here originate from villages, nor does year of immigration, education level, or age at immigration; but family immigration history and socioeconomic status in Palestine have great predictive value (Cainkar 1988).

### **Middle-Class Chain Immigrants**

#### **Background**

The majority of Palestinians in the U.S. middle and upper-middle class are from families in which at least one member immigrated to the United States before 1967, in the 1950s or early 1960s, or even more likely, between 1900 and 1920. Over the span of these years, the initially poor male immigrant of peasant background climbed up the socioeconomic ladder in the United States, shifting occupationally

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5. See Cainkar 1988 for a detailed discussion of the economic profile of Palestinians in the United States.

from street peddler and small merchant to stable business owner or skilled semiprofessional service worker. This type of socioeconomic mobility is fairly typical of most immigrants in the United States. By the time the large wave of post-1967 Palestinian immigrants came to the United States, these Palestinians, who began to bring wives over and establish families after 1949, were faring well economically. Pressure to remain Palestinian while in the United States was less strong in the community prior to 1967 than after, when the last remaining parts of Palestine fell under Israeli military rule, and the de-Arabization of all of Palestine was in process. Until that time, the part of Palestine from which the majority of these immigrants came (the West Bank) still existed under Arab (Jordanian) rule. This group of early (pre-1967) Palestinian immigrants saw themselves as economic migrants and approached adaptation to U.S. society with reservations similar to other immigrants. Muslim Palestinians, the focus of this chapter, faced a largely Christian culture which hindered their adaptation to U.S. society, but, based on studies of earlier Palestinian communities in the United States and interviews conducted with pre-1967 Palestinian immigrants, the religious difference hindered adaptation far less than did the effect of the total loss of Palestine in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

Family members that later joined these initial immigrants received rapid economic benefit from the resources, business experience, and networks their predecessors had established. Newcomers in these family chains did not have to endure the struggle to gain solid economic footing in the United States like the initial early immigrants. Whether they came before or after 1967, relatives of the early immigrants moved quickly, economically speaking, into middle-class U.S. society.

Patterns of adaptation to U.S. society were already established by their predecessors. While preserving Palestinian culture and behaving in ways compatible with Islam were important values, so was adopting some of what were perceived as the better aspects of U.S. middle-class culture. For young Palestinian women in this social class, whether they immigrated before or after 1967, being a Palestinian in the United States meant taking the best of both cultures.

This somewhat tolerant attitude of Palestinian immigrants to-

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6. See, e.g., al-Tahir 1952 and Cainkar 1988.



ward Western culture was not initiated upon immigration. Studies of Palestinian villages which had large numbers of immigrants in the West prior to 1967 have shown that families living on remittances from the West were perceived by other villagers as adopting Western values and rejecting traditional lifestyles (Lutfiyya 1966: Escribano and el-Joubeh 1981). For this, they were the subject of some scorn in the village. Remittance incomes from the Americas (North, Central, and South) allowed peasants to make leaps in status that altered traditional feudal relations. Families that had for years lived on the income generated by a small piece of land invested their remittance income in more land, buildings, new homes, and education for their sons. During the times of British and Jordanian rule over the West Bank, these young men were no longer farmers but small businesspersons, clerks in the civilian government, and school teachers. These families challenged both the traditional social structure of the village and traditional values at the same time. Thousands of Palestinians who had been living on remittances from the United States began emigrating to the United States each year following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. These Palestinians were, by the time they left their homeland, members of the new, semiwesternized Palestinian middle class in occupied Palestine. Their values and lifestyles did not clash as much with the U.S. society they moved into as did those of the large wave of Palestinian peasants who came to the United States after 1967.

### Values

Palestinian women in this subgroup who came with or to join their husbands or fathers moved into an entrenched network of relatives in the United States and fairly rapidly into the U.S. middle class, where they acclimated well to many U.S. middle-class values. Now they live in white, middle-class suburban neighborhoods, which daily expose them to and reinforce middle-class values. Their homes, their families, education of their children, and the acquisition of comfort-providing or labor-saving material goods are values they share with their non-Palestinian neighbors. While both Palestinian men and women support the traditional Palestinian cultural notion that women should dress and behave modestly, their clothing is Western and fashionable and simply excludes shorts, short skirts, and sleeve-

less tops. Upon entry to their homes, the visible signs of Palestinian identity emerge. Palestinian women decorate their homes with Palestinian artifacts—such as maps, embroidery, and pottery. While these Palestinian women believe that support, closeness, and solidarity among the extended family are important, they also value family privacy. Traditional Arab hospitality is seemingly reproduced without thought by Palestinian women, but these women often forgo the preparation of time-consuming Palestinian foods for more quickly prepared U.S. items.

These women want their children to speak Arabic, but find their efforts have been only fairly successful. One reason for this is that English is spoken frequently at home by both parents and relatives, from whom the children must learn Arabic. Some relatives have been in the United States for a considerable period of time and have adopted English as their primary language. In addition, a majority of these middle-class Palestinian women work by choice outside the home. Their jobs generally require speaking English, interacting with Americans, and dressing in a Western professional manner. They tend to be employed in semiskilled white-collar or service work, such as real estate, insurance, travel, or in small retail shops. For these jobs, many women have attended special training and certification classes. In spite of their wish that their children speak fluent Arabic, children of this social class tend to reach adulthood understanding only some of the language and unable to read and write it.

Despite their class position, immigrant Palestinian women over thirty in this group, especially those who immigrated before 1980, tend not to be highly educated. Depending upon when they left Palestine, they generally have from a sixth grade to a high school education. Unmarried women who immigrate to the United States and who do not marry soon after they arrive are the ones most able to obtain a university education. University education was not available in Palestine prior to 1980. Once married, it is difficult for a woman to manage college studies, especially since cultural expectations are that she begin a family soon after marriage. Palestinians place strong value on college education, viewing it as a moveable asset, and these women want both their sons and daughters to have one. Its value for their daughters is not only educational; these women feel their daughters will find better husbands and be able to

care for themselves and their families if they are educated, especially if it is economically necessary that at some point they work outside the home.

### Sexual Mores and Marriage Patterns

Concern over the behavior of women in the family—in public, with respect to unrelated males, and sexually—is one area of traditional culture that has witnessed a degree of bending among this Palestinian subgroup but nonetheless remains markedly distinct from white U.S. middle-class culture. Palestinian women are generally not allowed to date, although exceptions may be made in some middle-class families if the woman is of marriageable age, the man is an Arab Muslim, and marriage is a potential outcome. Marriage of a Palestinian Muslim woman to a non-Arab, especially a non-Muslim Arab, is highly frowned upon by the entire Palestinian community, regardless of social class. Coming from a tradition of arranged marriages, most often between cousins, this subgroup has liberalized the traditional rules by allowing a woman to select the Arab Muslim man she wishes to marry and spend some time getting to know him before marriage. Whether this period of getting to know a man can occur only after formal engagement varies by family, but if it is before engagement it should be supervised or at least out of the sight of other community members. A Palestinian woman seen in public with an unrelated man, or behaving in an unsubdued manner around unrelated men, is subject to community gossip and will be labeled as a woman with loose morals. Marriage within the community then becomes difficult. Palestinian women should be virgins when they marry; their parents expect this as do most of their potential spouses.

None of these rules apply to Palestinian men. They are allowed to date European-Americans, spend nights out of the home, even live with U.S. women they are not married to. And while most Palestinian families would prefer their sons to marry another Palestinian Muslim, marriages outside the ethnic group are accepted. They are in fact frequent in this social class among both immigrant men and U.S.-born and raised men, which makes it more difficult for middle-class Palestinian women to find a suitable Palestinian mate. Marriage outside the ethnic group by men but not women reduces the number of available men for Palestinian women. It is not un-

common to find single Palestinian women in their forties in this subgroup. Some women end up turning to the traditional family network for marriage, harkening back to the old days they so sought to avoid.

Basic social interaction between unrelated men and women, whether at someone's home, community events, work, or school, has nonetheless lost the dangerous sexual and moral connotations it once had for these Palestinians. Weddings, parties, and family gatherings are not separated by gender as they traditionally were. It is understood that men and women can socially interact without expressing or inviting sexual interest; and, more importantly, such behavior on the part of women is not condemned by their reference group as long as the setting is business or in a group and in public. Such social interactions are disapproved of if public displays of affection or physical contact between a man and a woman occur, or if a woman consumes alcohol and becomes excessively loud. If a Palestinian man engages in these behaviors with a non-Arab woman, however, different rules all together apply.

Immigrant Palestinian women in this subgroup generally feel that dating and premarital sex are negative aspects of U.S. culture that lead to social disrespect for women and many other social ills that are not evident in Palestine: broken families, single mothers, high divorce rates, and homeless women. Their approach to adjusting to U.S. life by taking the best of both cultures allows for some liberalization of traditional rules on female behavior but leaves other parts intact. As for what language spoken in the home, dress codes, and the fruits of hospitality, Palestinian ways are meshed with U.S., but more so for men than women. This was the approach adopted by their Palestinian predecessors, their reference group, and was normal for an immigrant population that had fared well economically in the United States and had a choice about whether to return to their homeland or not.

Since the 1967 Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, when the option of returning to Palestine has become practically impossible, Palestinians in the United States realize that preserving their culture in diaspora is critically important to their survival as a people. A community-wide ethos has emerged encouraging as few adaptations to U.S. society as possible. This group of Palestinians, however, especially the women, while agreeing in theory



with the political importance of such a goal, are not about to turn back after so many accommodations have already been made. Their identity as Palestinian-Americans has become entrenched, but they note that they cannot consider themselves full Americans as long as U.S. policy prevents the possibility of their return and encourages the destruction of their homeland. They remain determined to pass this hyphenated identity on to their children and will in all likelihood be somewhat successful as long as they feel they are in the United States by force, not by choice.

### **From Peasant to Petit Merchant**

#### **Background**

The Palestinian women just described contrast sharply with the tens of thousands of Palestinian women who emigrated to the United States after 1967 and especially after 1975; they are also primarily from West Bank villages with few family ties to the West, and had been surviving on local means of support. Normally, their income came from farming small landholdings or from laboring in Israel, a labor market that opened to Palestinians after 1967 and became necessary for survival in light of continued Israeli confiscations of Palestinian land. Although the Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem areas of Palestine had always been the source of most Palestinian immigrants to the United States, the Israeli concentration on land confiscations in these areas in the 1970s and 1980s created an even greater emigrant push. Palestinians from other parts of Palestine, especially men, also began leaving at this time in larger numbers than before, but it was the Palestinians from these central West Bank areas who were most likely to emigrate to the United States rather than seek jobs in Kuwait, Jordan, or other Arab countries (Migdal 1980). These Palestinians uprooted themselves from traditional peasant life in the 1970s and 1980s and came to the United States to escape political and economic oppression.

Their migration to the United States normally began with a male who either had a relative here or entered the country to study. Unlike the chain immigrants described above, this group of immigrants had not been living on incomes supplemented by remittances nor did they walk into an already entrenched network of middle-class relatives

living in the United States. The men could get help finding work from other members of the Palestinian community, but normally started at the bottom, for example as underpaid clerks in Palestinian grocery stores. In time, with about \$5000 saved, they could join with another Palestinian to purchase a small business, such as the infrastructure and stock of a grocery store or fast-food stand. Military occupation made life fairly intolerable and often dangerous in Palestine, so these Palestinians chose within a few years of their arrival to bring their families or new wives to the United States despite their limited incomes.

These Palestinians occupy the lower-middle and upper-lower class in the United States, which places them in about the same position they were in in Palestine. They brought with them the customs and values of the Palestinian peasantry, at a time when the ethos of keeping Palestinian culture alive (post-1967 occupation) had gained considerable strength as a political mandate among Palestinians in the United States. The ethos reinforces the propriety of remaining Palestinian against all odds in the United States and members of this subgroup subscribe to this viewpoint not only theoretically but also in their daily patterns of behavior. Traditionalism has become a badge of honor. It is measured, by both Palestinian men and women in this subgroup, more by the behavior of women than men.

Palestinian women in this group survive economically on the income their husbands or fathers make while employed either in factories, or more likely, as self-employed owners or renters of small businesses in poor, minority neighborhoods. Family income is not high, and especially in the case of merchants, the male head of the household works long hours and is gone at least twelve hours a day, six days a week. Sunday work hours are cut short to afford time with family and for social visits. Women bear full responsibility for child care, housework, and food preparation and these tasks consume most of their waking hours. They prepare time-consuming Palestinian dishes nearly every day, and in their spare moments they pickle olives and eggplants and make homemade yogurt and cheese.

In general, only men work outside the home and interact extensively with U.S. society. Unlike the middle-class families who live in white suburbs, these families tend to settle in urban neighborhoods near other Palestinians like themselves. Often they form a buffer community between whites and African-Americans. The community

of Palestinians in which they settle shares their values and perspectives and actively reinforces the maintenance of conservative ideas and modes of behavior. Palestinian women are in charge of recreating a Palestinian home and cultural milieu in the United States and are evaluated by other members of their subcommunity on how well they do it.

### Values

Everything about these women's homes is reminiscent of life in Palestine: the furniture arrangements, the wall decorations, the types of food cooked and served, the way guests are treated—and at times separated by gender—and the language, which is Arabic. Children are spoken to in Arabic and frequently begin school in the United States knowing only the English they hear on television. They continue to speak Arabic at home, even as their public lives become more centered around the English language. Parents often send their children back to the village in the summer to immerse them in Palestinian language and culture. By adulthood their Arabic is quite good, although they are not able to read and write it without formal schooling.

Married women tend to have from four to seven children and reside in apartments or small houses with two or three bedrooms. Few women work outside the home because it is interpreted by community members as a sign that the male wage earner cannot adequately support his family. Women only leave their homes to visit other women, to shop or to attend school, and usually only after consulting with an appropriate family male. A woman frequently out of the home without good reason is talked about by other women and men. If this happens, another woman in the community will speak to her about her behavior, warning her before the gossip gets out of hand. Once it does, she will be reprimanded by her husband, father, or mother for soiling the family's reputation.

Like the middle-class Palestinian women described above, these women tend to have from a sixth grade to a high school education. In all likelihood, even if they had stayed in Palestine, they would not have been sent to college by their parents. They nonetheless believe that a college education is important for both their sons and daughters. Whether their daughters will gain this education is another story.

Due to concerns over women's sexuality and virginity, members of this subgroup tend to want their daughters married shortly after high school. This is not necessarily the case in the Middle East; it is related to fears generated by the greater sexual freedoms women have in U.S. society and the preponderance of premarital sex. Many women marry with the agreement of their spouse that they can finish college, but find that childcare and housework make it difficult to actually accomplish this. Since it is assumed that the extended family will care for a woman if she loses her spouse, a wife gains social insurance if not her education.

### Sexual Mores and Marital Patterns

While in public these women are careful not to engage in extended conversation with unrelated men and not to behave in a way that would call attention to themselves—by talking loudly or laughing in an obvious manner. Private social visits are limited to women only; if men are present, women should be accompanied by their fathers, brothers, or husbands and even then will likely be separated into rooms by gender. In mixed company of relatives and married couples, women should maintain proper decorum and not be outspoken. To be aggressive around like-aged women and children is perfectly acceptable and normal; to be aggressive to older women is disrespectful and to do so around men reveals a lack of self-control. This invites sexual innuendo, as a woman repeatedly lacking self-control is seen to be sexually untrustworthy.

Dating by single women is absolutely forbidden, as is attending parties and community events where men are present without family supervision. The imperative of an arranged marriage to a cousin (in the manner of the parents' marriage) is waning in this subgroup, but a marriage offer—which must be from an Arab Muslim, preferably Palestinian—is usually made first to the family, and only after family approval does the daughter have the opportunity to meet and speak with the suitor. She must normally make her decision about marriage after just a few supervised meetings with the man. Only after engagement, which in Muslim tradition is actually the signing of a binding marriage contract, can the couple go out with each other alone.

Single Palestinian men in this group are not subject to these



constraints. They are free to date American women, engage in pre-marital sex with them, and marry them. This double standard is also true for middle-class Palestinians, but the amount of leeway and trust granted women of that class means that their every move is not scrutinized for possible violations, nor would they risk total social isolation if caught. Palestinian women from the lower socioeconomic strata would be severely punished for such behavior, which might take the form of "house arrest," or being returned to relatives in the Middle East and socially ostracized. In a milieu where socializing is confined to family and local women, and women are chosen for marriage based partly on their reputation, social ostracism is a heavy price to pay.

Marriage outside the ethnic group is less common among men in this class than in the middle class, but problems remain that reduce the number of male suitors for Palestinian women seeking marriage in this subgroup. Men frequently marry Palestinian women (often relatives) from Palestine or Jordan in keeping with family tradition. These women are seen by this group of Palestinian men as "more Palestinian" than the women who have lived in the United States and thus more likely to treat them in the privileged way their mothers did. For the same reason, Palestinian men in the Middle East of this socioeconomic background are less likely to favor marrying a woman who has lived in the United States, unless they are seeking to emigrate. This provides another reason for the earlier marriage of women in this group—the younger and less educated they are, the more appealing and educationally equivalent they will be to their potential pool of suitors.

These Palestinian women say they are not in the United States to stay and therefore seek to maintain the behavioral patterns that were normative in their social group when they left Palestine. They quite openly admit that this is more difficult in the United States than in Palestine and results in significant losses in freedom for them. In Palestine, where the basic values are shared by all and where women do not fear rape or assault on the street, women's freedom of movement is far less constricted than it is in the United States, where fear of attack provides a rationale for others to keep women's autonomous social movements in check. Of course, their assumption that social patterns in Palestine have remained static in their absence is untrue, but it is nonetheless the only Palestinian reality known to them. Even

if some women would like to abandon a few of the more restrictive features of the culture, especially as they play out in the context of the United States, the community of eyes ensures proper behavior so that individual attempts to stretch the boundaries risk social isolation. Straying from tradition is viewed as something akin to revolt. These Palestinians identify themselves as Palestinians in the United States, rather than Palestinian-Americans. Only upward social mobility and their children's generation will bring about acceptance of a hyphenated identity. But like the other Palestinians discussed above, acceptance of a full U.S. identity is a matter of future generations and the political status of Palestine.

### **When the Two Meet**

These two types of Palestinian women are readily distinguishable from each other at community *haffes* (parties) or events. While the middle-class, semiacclimated Palestinian woman will normally be wearing Western clothes, the conservative Palestinian woman will be wearing the traditional Palestinian dress, and many of them will have their hair covered. I found during my extensive interviews with Palestinian women that each group disagrees with the other as to how to live as Palestinians in the United States. While one group criticizes the other as being too Western and not real Palestinians, the other says that the conservative, traditional women are leading lives that are backward and oppressive. Although both types of women may be from a village in Palestine, may have married a relative in an arranged marriage, and may not have more than a high school education, their lives are clearly very different. While middle-class Palestinian women see the United States for all the opportunities it affords them, lower-middle and lower-class Palestinian women see it as merely a place to live for a while, devoid of the land, family, customs, foods, and community life that gave their lives meaning in Palestine. These women have little in common with each other aside from their ethnic background, continued respect for certain cultural values, and their political commitment to Palestine, which requires that they maintain their Palestinian identity and avoid full assimilation.

### **Beginnings of a New Immigration**

This portrait of Palestinian women covers the vast majority of adult immigrant Palestinian women in the United States. Additionally, since

the late 1970s there has been an increasing number of Palestinian women immigrants who came from different parts of Palestine or came after marrying Palestinian men who entered the United States for different reasons than those discussed above. These men initially came to the United States only to study and had planned to leave once finished. But they decided, usually on the basis of job opportunities and the declining job market in the Gulf states, to stay. Unlike the others who emigrated from the Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem areas of Palestine, these Palestinians originated from the Nablus, Jenin, and Tulkarm areas in the north of Palestine, or were refugees from the parts of Palestine that became the State of Israel and who resettled in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, or Kuwait.

These women may fall into either subcategory mentioned above, depending on their family income. Some of them are well-educated while others have a high school education. But they all share a feeling of great loneliness. Torn away from their family and friends and not sharing bonds of kin or community of origin with other Palestinians in the United States, the social and emotional deprivations they endure make adjustment to life in the United States very difficult. While many of these women said they thought marriage to a man living in the United States would be exciting, they soon discovered that this was not the case.

### **Political Life**

Despite differences, Palestinian women share a deep concern for the fate of their people in Palestine and other Arab countries and feel strongly that a Palestinian state must be established. Prominent in any discussion with them is mention that Palestinians are stateless people, that they have few freedoms in their own country, that their land is being stolen, their way of life controlled and destroyed, and that most have no right to return to their country. Every Palestinian woman I spoke with emphasized the tragedy of the Palestinian people and how it has affected her life and split apart her family. Each also spoke of the general hostility or lack of concern U.S. citizens show about this situation. My conversations with Palestinian women affirm what Edward Said noted in his book *After the Last Sky* (1986): While there is not a singular Palestinian experience due to the various and scattered fates of the Palestinian people, Palestinians do in fact form

one community, "if at heart a community built on suffering and exile." The ethos of exile prominent among Palestinians in the United States developed out of this communal experience. It means not forgetting that one is a Palestinian. For Palestinian women, it means not only maintaining a strong Palestinian ethnic identity, but raising children to be Palestinian.

Palestinian political activities and the ethos of exile merge together in different ways for Palestinian women. Beyond raising their children as Palestinians and maintaining respect for certain traditional Arab values, middle-class Palestinian women are more likely than other Palestinian women to be politically active publicly, normally through Palestinian or Arab-American organizations. Observation of such organizations shows this to be the case. This is why studies of Palestinian immigrants or Palestinian women that focus on accessible and visible participants in organized groups are skewed toward the patterns of the middle-class, semiacclimated Palestinians.

Traditional Palestinian women, from the lower social classes, have tended to shun public political life because they, their husbands, or fathers believe that such activities are not appropriate for Palestinian women. Within the communities in which they live, politically active married women are frowned upon because it is assumed they must be neglecting their families; and single women who have that much time should be married, they say. Public politics is seen as a man's activity. On the other hand, these Palestinian women believe that their daily lives are an active expression of the Palestinian political ethos of exile: keeping Palestine alive. Through their daily work of maintaining a Palestinian home, preparing arduous Palestinian meals, speaking Arabic and teaching it to their children, and focusing their lives on the maintenance and fulfillment of traditional Palestinian values, they are keeping alive what occupation and exile are destroying. Others talk politics, they live them. Within broadly based Palestinian community organizations their way of life is respected, even when it is not adopted by everyone.

## **Conclusion**

While social class certainly does not explain everything about the lives of Palestinian women in the United States, I have found it the best way to characterize the diversity of lifestyle patterns existing



within the larger community. All of the women I studied were Muslims. Most of them defined Islam as a way of life. Few attended the mosque or felt it necessary to do so; few prayed at home. Still, different persons interpreted Islamic injunctions differently, especially as they relate to women. They were sometimes used to justify limiting a woman's movements, but more often culture was used as the rationale. While I note recently an increase in the number of fundamentalist Muslims in the United States, they still remain a minority among Palestinians.

In conclusion, there is no typical Palestinian woman in the United States. Those who wish to highlight the fact that Palestinians have adapted well to the United States focus on one part of the community, while those who wish to show that they are a traditional people who have changed little since they left their Arab villages focus on another sector. In fact, both of these realities exist at the same time and both groups of people insist that their identity as Palestinians lies at the core of the alienation they feel in the United States. The Intifada and the Gulf war only served to reinforce this feeling.

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