

## How Do We Read Violence against Palestinian Women in Israel?

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian \*

The history on violence against women (VAW) in colonial contexts recorded that new gender ideologies were introduced to the colonies (e.g., Mama, 1997; Fanon, 1980). Such ideologies are affected both by internal (e.g., patriarchal oppression; control over women's sexuality and bodily rights; extremism and fundamentalism; tribal and community feuds and conflicts; and sectarianism) and external (e.g., global failure to acknowledge and/or prevent injustice; and military invasions) factors, fed by cultural, economic, and political conditions, which interact within a complex dynamic. Violence against women in colonial contexts has not only affected the public and the private sphere, but also emphasized that the personal is political, and the political-economic is very personal. Examining VAW under the Israeli colonial regime requires that we look closely at the history of the settler colonial past and at present manifestations in Palestine/Israel as part of tracing the genealogy of the conditions that promote violence against women (e.g., Haj-Yahia, 1996, 2000; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2004).

In our case-study, VAW should be examined from both a historic and contemporary perspective that looks at the 1948 *Nakba* as the main analytical point of departure, in order to reveal the ways in which Palestinians in Israel were and continue to be culturally and materially subjected to racial hierarchy and its gendered policies and politics. The racial hierarchy in the Israeli state is embedded in its Jewishness and corresponding Zionist ideology, which constructs gendered politics within an orientalist, colonialist and Zionist male structural system (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2000). Such Israeli colonial penetrations and ethnocentrism (Yiftachel, 2006) have exploited pre-existing social divisions in the Palestinian culture, and in turn increased Palestinian women's vulnerability to various forms of violence.

This article argues that understanding violence against women in Palestinian society in Israel compels analysis to develop first out of women's own voices, and second out of colonial contexts to enhance our understanding of the effect of Israeli settler colonialism on Palestinian women "citizens" of the state of Israel, who, following the 1948 *Nakba*, were transformed into an unwanted minority in their homeland (Rouhana, 1997).

I begin by borrowing meanings and insights from Salwa, a Palestinian woman who shared with me (during my recent study on "Palestinian women and the Israeli political economy as reflected in housing demolitions in the Naqab area") her ordeal and suffering as an unrecognized and unwanted woman. Her ordeal allows us to address such questions as: What are the social and cultural factors that affect violence against Palestinian women in Israel? What are the political, social and

economic factors that oblige women to “tolerate” violence against them? What are the political climates and contexts that buttress structures of oppressions?

On that day, following the demolitions, and at night, we were all sitting, crying, talking, thinking, what can we do? How could we deal with the loss of the house? I was in a state of shock. Sitting, listening to people talking, but my mind was floating; I felt I was lost in this world. All of a sudden, I heard my baby screaming and crying, and realized he had crawled into the fire. There was no fire, but the stones and the sand were still boiling, and he burned both his hands, his palms, his fingers, and part of his chin. We took him to the hospital, but his burns were severe. Just think about the fact that they demolished our homes and neighborhood, and we go to the hospital, see their faces, and get their medical help, horrible feeling, horrible. We stayed in the hospital, and everyone looked at me and my husband with anger. They even called the police to interrogate me; this is called in Israel "violence against children". It was terrible, my child was suffering, my husband was blaming me, I lost my home, I was interrogated...the worst day of my life.

We stayed in the hospital for two weeks, and every time the doctors and nurses came to check on the baby, they looked down on me; I was the primitive Bedouin mother who had failed to protect her son from being burned. That made us all sad at home, turned my husband into a different man. It was the first time he raised his hand at me, the first time he hit me, and this violence never stopped. My home really was demolished that day; and the family I have is not the same anymore. All of them are not the same. All our houses were demolished...and I do not know what I am doing anymore. Burning my son burned me from inside, and burned my family and my life....It burns my heart every day I see him.

Salwa's voice shares with us the effect of Israel's ideology/policy and practices on the everydayness of her life as an individual living in and belonging to an unrecognized village, as a women who lost her home and homeland, as a young mother who found herself failing to protect her child, and as a wife who suffers from abuse. The reordering of her world following the multiplicity of her losses and the workings of power that reconstructed Salwa's womanhood and motherhood , the scope of her homelessness – social, physical, mental and emotional – deeply affected the way she was treated, whether by her own husband and society, or by the authorities and caregivers that looked down on her. Her obscurity reveals the plurality of the arenas of her oppression – as an individual, woman, mother, wife,

and as a “citizen” who suffers from violence and is theoretically entitled to help, but practically her “helper” is also her colonizer.

Each sphere of oppression has its own separate logic, but nonetheless, they are all entangled with Salwa’s status, the internal patriarchal structure of her own society and community, and the state’s ideology and its colonial logics, when operating in certain contexts. Faced with this plurality of legitimizing oppressive rubrics, supported by institutionalized forms and rules that monopolize the way she is portrayed, Salwa explains the way her body and life are controlled by the everydayness of patriarchy and colonialism. Demolishing her house reorganized her gender roles, while creating several fluid identities: an unrecognized “un-woman”; undeserving “citizen”; unfit mother; abused wife; unwanted Bedouin; unheard voice; and more. With such a plurality of losses, patriarchal oppression and everydayness of aggressions, Salwa continues to be considered an unrecognized subject that “threatens” the state of Israel with her “primitivity”, visibility -- despite her invisibility -- when asking for medical, social or economic help, and by her very existence.

As reflected in Salwa’s words, the colonial state uses the attack on the Palestinian home as a strategy to demolish homes and displace people, turning them into unrecognizable homeless entities in their homeland. These state actions have created confused and contradictory attitudes towards women. On the one hand, the state presents its official policy as one based on equality, civility and a legal system that protects women and children from any form of abuse. This declared policy claims to save Salwa’s son from her “primitive and negligent” behavior, and to save her, as an abused woman, from her husband’s violent behavior. On the other hand, it defines Salwa as a primitive, uncivilized woman, belonging to “a backward society”, to “un-modern” and unrecognized entities.

VAW in this Palestinian case-study in Israel clarifies to a large degree the way colonialism, violence and patriarchy interrelate. As indicated by Fanon (1980), in most colonies, there is a link between the conquest of the land and violence against women. Salwa’s case reveals that violent treatment by the racial state contributes to the exclusion of women from political, structural and economic circles, and reinforces the structures and interests of patriarchal power-holders. The obstinance of Israel’s colonial regime lies in its playing the “benevolent” role (in offering medical service to the burned child, and social service to Salwa), while further domesticating the lives of women and transforming gender relations in complex, contradictory, and diverse ways. The confinement of women to a socially and economically dependent role, and the reinforcement of a male-dominated world, increases Palestinian women's vulnerability to abuses.

\* **Dr. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian** is the Director of the Gender Studies Program at Mada al-Carmel and a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Law, Institute of Criminology and the School of Social Work and Public Welfare at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

## References

- Fanon, F (1980). *A dying colonialism*. New York: Grove Press.
- Haj-Yahia, M. M. (1996). Wife abuse in Arab society in Israel: Challenges for future change. In J.L. Edleson & Z.C. Eisikovits (Eds.), *Future interventions with battered women and their families* (pp. 87-101). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Haj-Yahia, M. M. (2000). Wife abuse and battering in the sociocultural context of Arab society. *Family Process*, 39 (2), 149-268.
- Mama, A.(1997). Heroes and villains: Conceptualising colonial and contemporary violence against women in Africa. In M. Alexander & C. Mohanty (Eds.), *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Rouhana, N. (1997). *Palestinian citizens in an ethnic Jewish state: Identities in conflict*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2000). The efficacy of Israeli law in preventing violence within Palestinian families living in Israel. *International Review of Victimology*, 7, 47-66.
- Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2004). Militarization and policing: Police reactions to violence against Palestinian women in Israel. *Social Identities*, 10 (2), 171-194.
- Yiftachel, O. (2006). *Ethnocracy, land, and identity politics in Israel/Palestine*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.