

# Everyday Practices of Sacrifice: A Case Study of Palestinian Women

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**Abstract:** In this article, I explore how ‘narratives of sacrifice’ shape the lives of Palestinian women living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in exile in Lebanon and affect the choices they make. By focusing on women’s ‘everyday practice’, I argue that, in response to the dangers and apparent hopelessness of their situation, Palestinians have adopted sacrifice as a conscious mode of struggle, one that also offers a way of giving meaning to senseless events. There is a tendency to identify sacrificial acts as male, but such assumptions need to be reconsidered. The concept of sacrifice is complex and is also gendered. I investigate inadvertent sacrifice – the role of the victim or resister – and deliberate sacrifice, as a way of protecting the community. The notion of sacrifice is closely linked to practices of resistance. As well, it has a strong affinity with the preservation of identity and should therefore not be interpreted solely as a symptom of powerlessness.

**Keywords:** Sacrifice, Palestinian women, community, violence

Holt, Maria. 2018. ‘Everyday Practices of Sacrifice: A Case Study of Palestinian Women.’ *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, Vol. 19, No. 1: 2–25. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13060/25706578.2018.19.1.403>.

*Palestinian women tend to become more active during difficult times, such as war; they become more involved in political and public life. For example, between 1982 and 1985, they played an important role because the men were in prison or in exile. They participated in the great struggle against the Israeli invasion and also in the camp wars. As the men could not leave the camps, the women became responsible for defending the camps. They had to organise how to move because they were the only ones who could go outside. But this was very dangerous for women.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, Beirut, 29 January 2007.

These words were uttered by Fadwa,<sup>2</sup> who works for a human rights organisation in Beirut. Her claim that in the 1980s Palestinian women 'became responsible for defending the camps' and that this task was 'very dangerous' suggests 'a sacrificial offering without hope of return' (Millbank 1999) made by Palestinian women to protect their community. This raises the question of what exactly is meant by 'sacrifice' in the Palestinian context. As this article will demonstrate, it is a somewhat elusive concept and I am keen to articulate a more robust definition. The case study of Palestinian women suggests that it should be detached from its more familiar association with acts of political violence and also from the concept of 'resistance'. One of the definitions of 'sacrifice' is 'to give up something precious in order to gain or maintain something, such as a valuable relationship or some other worthy cause' (Ben Zeev 2010). Over the more than 70 years of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, many Palestinians – men, women, and children – have been killed or hurt by Israelis in ways that often seem random and pointless. In order to give meaning to senseless acts and to insist that a person's life has not been 'wasted', Palestinians have crafted two responses; the first is 'resistance', armed and unarmed, whereby actions are undertaken to counter what is seen as Israeli aggression. But a second process is also required, as a way of bearing witness and conferring dignity to the victims of 'senseless' acts of hurt and killing; I define this process as 'sacrifice'. However, I also argue that, while it implies giving up 'something precious', such as security, dignity, or bodily integrity, it also incorporates 'a seemingly paradoxical stream of everyday practice' (Jean-Klein 2001: 83). For Palestinians living under Israeli occupation or in exile in Lebanon, 'everyday practice' often assumes the dimensions of a heroic struggle against overwhelming odds. Their 'everyday practice' is both unremarkable, in the sense that it involves getting on with life, and gendered as female because women's domestic activities structure the everyday life of the community.

Building on Fadwa's description of Palestinian women as active, involved, and responsible during 'difficult' times, my article proposes to challenge the stereotype of women merely as helpless victims of violent conflict by focusing on the diverse responses of Palestinian women in the Occupied Territories and in Lebanon, which I define as sacrificial responses. While women are certainly victimised by various forms of violence that are directly and indirectly caused by conflict, they have also developed survival strategies, which range from non-violent protest and 'getting by' to militant – and sometimes controversial – activism. With reference to feminist scholarship on violence and conflict and to my own fieldwork with Palestinian women in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Lebanon, I will suggest that, through their efforts, women are articulating, in Julie Peteet's words, a 'commentary on sacrifice'

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<sup>2</sup> Not her real name. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

(2000: 109) that shapes their day-to-day existence. It highlights the tension between 'an idealized masculinity that depends on constructing women as passive victims in need of protection' (Tickner 1992: 59) and the pressures on women to play a full role as resisters. However, conflict, including the low-intensity conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, can be an ambivalent process for women; while they tend to be the chief victims of violence, it is also the case, as Wenona Giles argues, that 'those living in traditional patriarchal societies may find that war is a time of release from the constricting hierarchies of peacetime existence' (2003: 1); this experience enables the female sacrificial agent to emerge.

By focusing on the 'everyday practice' of Palestinian women, and the ways in which such practices are sometimes subverted to enable women to engage in less traditional forms of behaviour, I will consider how women are offering 'a commentary on sacrifice' and how 'narratives of sacrifice' structure their lives and affect the choices they make. My own research demonstrates that women who sacrifice themselves, even violently and deliberately, are often admired in the community for their nationalist beliefs (Hasso 2005; Yaqub 2011). In the context of this article, it is important to recognise that, although the practice of 'patriotic sacrifice' and the protection of the nation or the community are usually constructed as male – as Franke observes, 'the whole glorification machinery is organized by men' (2015) – in the Palestinian case women have at least partially transcended these gendered categories, thus challenging 'the constricting hierarchies of peacetime existence'. In this article I argue that their actions have contributed, although not always positively, to the creation of a new model of the female national subject; therefore, the analysis I outline here builds a picture of a specifically female model of sacrifice.

The first part of the article theorises 'sacrifice' from the perspectives of violence, women's agency, and everyday practice. Violence is an ongoing danger weaving its way through Palestinian history, and the concept of sacrifice may be seen as a response, although it should be stressed that sacrifice is more than simply a reaction against the many forms of violence perpetrated against the community. Notions of sacrifice will be analysed in relation to Palestinian practices of resistance, which are conventionally viewed through the lens of 'patriotic sacrifice' by men. However, I intend to problematise and broaden this approach, to argue that 'sacrifice' involves violent and non-violent responses to conflict, some of which are performed by women.

The second part of the article considers what Palestinians are trying to protect and preserve through their employment of sacrificial acts. It will present a particular articulation of community, both as locally constructed and in terms of a larger national entity. There is too little attention, as Caitlin Ryan argues, 'to how communities may engage in their own resilience building without outside intervention or interference' (2015). Palestinians, living in exile or under Israeli occupation, have

reached the conclusion that they can only rely on their own community, an abstract and fragmented Palestinian nation. In this sense, community is associated with embattlement or resignation. In the face of international neglect and the threat of national obliteration, as they see it, Palestinians use sacrifice as a way of conferring meaning and dignity on senseless acts of violence. Women occupy a central place in this community, as wives, mothers, and daughters, but also, in response to their precarious situation, as activists.

The theoretical framework will be tested by critically surveying the activities and narratives of Palestinian women, the subjects of my research, and the ways in which their action, or refusal to act, strengthens communal cohesion. Thus, the final part of the article explores several understandings of 'sacrifice': first, inadvertent sacrifice – the role of the victim or resister; second, deliberate sacrifice, as a way of protecting the community; and finally, I will consider the possibility that non-violent behaviour by women can be included in the category of sacrifice by linking it to Jean-Klein's 'seemingly paradoxical stream of everyday practice' (2001: 83) and arguing that even by simply trying to 'get on with life' women are placing themselves in danger. By analysing the life experiences of Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in exile in Lebanon through the lens of sacrifice, I hope to articulate new ways of conceptualising the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I do not seek to romanticise Palestinian women as uniquely emancipated. But I will suggest that what women have done, through voluntary and involuntary means, is to assume the burden of struggle as a shared communal undertaking that calls into question the stale assumption of female powerlessness in patriarchal environments.

## Methodology

This article draws on evidence gathered during several periods of fieldwork research in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (2000, 2004, 2007) and the refugee camps of Lebanon (2003, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2015).<sup>3</sup> I interviewed over 200 women in total from a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status, educational attainment, and place of origin. I asked women about their memories; these memories were frequently associated with various forms of violence, from the violence of dispossession in 1948 and the various wars of invasion and occupation, to social violence and the harm inflicted on women by lack of opportunity. I also asked about the role of resistance in women's lives and how it is expressed; this evoked expressions

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<sup>3</sup> In 2006-2007, my work on Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Council. In 2007-2008, my research into women and Islamic resistance in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories was funded by the United States Institute of Peace.



of agency and defiance. By recognising that ‘women’s everyday struggles, although mostly quiet and largely unrecognized, are political acts’ (Richter-Devroe 2011: 36), I propose to link demonstrations of ‘patriotic sacrifice’ by women to the larger landscape of communal survival.

My interest in the broad and nuanced topic of ‘Palestinian women’ is rooted in activism and advocacy and in a longstanding desire to inform non-Arab publics about the realities and gender complexities of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although I identify as an ‘outsider’, a non-Arab, non-Muslim Western woman, I have built sustained contacts with Palestinian communities, particularly with refugee communities in Lebanon, over many years. From my first visit to Lebanon in the early 1990s, when I was taken by a Palestinian activist to Ain el-Hilwe camp in Sidon, I have been struck by the extraordinary determination, energy, and courage with which women deal with multiple and persistent forms of violence within and against their community. It is their commitment to ‘getting on with life’ that inspired my interest in female sacrifice. Nonetheless, with Rosemary Sayigh, I acknowledge the inadequacy of my intervention as a researcher to ease Palestinian women’s suffering and how ‘much harder it would be to live their lives instead of merely writing about them’ (2002: 71).

## Theorising sacrifice

From the early 20th century, when an emerging Palestinian nationalism came into conflict with Zionism over the land of Palestine, the link to ‘the ethos of patriotic sacrifice’ (Zerubavel 2006) has been clear. Palestinian dispossession and the yearning to return has generated several modes of response and women’s sacrificial acts highlight the contradiction between resistance, on the one hand, as ‘terrorism’ and, on the other, as ‘the highest good’. Sacrifice, as Ben Zeev notes, ‘entails actual deeds and losses. One cannot sacrifice in one’s mind what one does not have in reality’ (2010). Palestinian Legislative Council member Dr Mariam Saleh equates sacrifice with resistance or *jihad*.<sup>4</sup> In her words: ‘*If one teaches women to be patient, it is a form of jihad. Some women give their own souls – they fight and are martyred – even ordinary women*’.<sup>5</sup> Her understanding of sacrifice highlights the apparent interchangeability between the terms ‘sacrifice’ and ‘resistance’; while I agree they are closely linked and both can be interpreted as ‘forms of *jihad*’, I think there are significant differences. ‘Sacrifice’, I suggest, is imagined as a fearless or patriotic act, such as a soldier in battle, risking his life for the sake of his country, ‘the heroic sacrifice for a noble cause’ (Salih 2017: 753). According to this understanding, the decision to join the nation’s armed forces

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<sup>4</sup> Derived from the Arabic, ‘*jihad*’ means to struggle or to strive.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 1 November 2007.

is 'the ultimate sacrifice', a mark of 'courage and unquestioning patriotism' (Greene 2004). But it can also be an altruistic act, such as a daughter sacrificing her own life to care for her elderly parents. As David Allen (2004) interestingly points out, individuals who sacrifice themselves by dying in battle 'are glorified by most societies as heroes. Mothers who send their sons off to war are also honoured'. This indicates the diverse types of sacrifice; while men's sacrifices are likely to be characterised as 'glorious', women's tend to be described as 'selfless'; they are giving up 'something precious' and such 'womanly acts' are routine and assumed. However, these 'essentialised identities' are challenged by Giles's claim of war as 'a time of release' and by Amina's assertion of growing female confidence. At such times, acts of 'patriotic sacrifice' undertaken by women become part of the larger landscape of communal survival.

This raises the question of whether, in sacrificing 'something precious', women are acting as agents. Jessica Auchter suggests that we need to 'problematize the idea that there is a definitive and closed conception of what an agent is' (2012: 136). She is referring, in particular, to female terrorists and 'the ways in which we attribute subjectivity to them' (2012: 135). Auchter's remarks build on the work of Judith Butler, who, by rejecting the totalising category of 'woman', argues instead that it is perhaps 'only through releasing the category of women from a fixed referent that something like "agency" becomes possible' (1995: 50). For Paul Kockelman, agency 'might be understood as the relatively flexible wielding of means towards ends' (2007: 375). But, as Roald notes, it is possible 'to link Kockelman's notion of agency as flexibility and accountability to the understanding of agency as free will and resistance to power' (2016: 3). This notion of agency as 'resistance to power' supports my argument that sacrifice is a conscious choice by Palestinian women to 'give up something precious'. In a fascinating contribution to the debate, Ruba Salih distinguishes between women's 'embodied agency, which focuses on the ordinary, the domestic, bodily vulnerability and grief' and a notion of 'the public sphere as the only intelligible way to act politically' (2017: 756). Similarly, Gentry and Sjoberg express concern that women are 'attributed little or no agency and analytically marginalized into the private sphere' (2015: 13). This apparent contradiction will be further explored below.

At the height of the civil rights movement in the United States of America, Martin Luther King observed that 'every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle'.<sup>6</sup> This is the notion of 'sacrifice' as 'an act of giving up something precious'. It is also a form of power 'through which individuals transform themselves into the willing subjects of a moral discourse', defined as the subject's

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, Chapter XI 'Where Do We Go from Here?'



agency (Bracke 2016: 62–63). For Palestinians, the struggle for justice and a resolution of the conflict demands constant sacrifice. On one level, they see their decision to give up something precious as a patriotic act that strengthens and sustains the larger community. This is the root of Palestinian self-sacrifice and the notion of ‘martyrdom’. But feminist scholarship has highlighted the gendered nature of conflict, and it is important to point out here that the sacrifice of one’s own body is an extreme act; there are many smaller and less overtly violent forms of sacrifice, some of which are made by women.

Sacrifice has been described as the ‘highest good’; in John Millbank’s words: ‘the highest ethical gesture is a sacrificial self-offering which expects no benefit in return’ (1999). However, resistance is not always, or necessarily, violent. Um Youssef, a teacher in Ramallah, while recognising the need for resistance, is critical of some of the tactics employed. In her view: *‘The suicide bombings and acts of violence came of frustration, but this is not acceptable. The resistance must be against military occupation ... I can understand the violence of resistance but cannot accept it.’*<sup>7</sup> As she says, sacrifice is not only about killing oneself or being killed in pursuit of the ‘highest good’; it takes more subtle forms, from the child throwing stones at an Israeli tank to the woman forced to give birth at an Israeli military checkpoint after being denied permission to cross and reach a hospital. As described by a former Palestinian government minister:

*The occupation radicalises people [...] the dehumanisation and terrorisation of people, placing life and death on an equal basis. In this sense, women suffer more victimisation; for example, checkpoints, restrictions on movement. It takes longer to get to school or university [...] women may be harassed by soldiers; therefore, it is easier to stay at home and many have stopped studying. Now girls are getting married earlier; one-third of the population is married before the age of 17.*<sup>8</sup>

For Palestinians living under Israeli occupation or biding their time in harsh conditions of exile until they can return home, the notion of sacrifice is regarded as an act of defiance. It signifies an individual’s willingness to ‘give up something precious’ or to ‘become responsible’ in the face of overwhelming opposition.

Julie Peteet has written about the enactment of masculinity by Palestinian boys and young men subjected to various forms of brutal treatment by Israelis in the West Bank. Displaying ‘physical marks of violence that one is usually powerless to avoid’,

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 13 June 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Zahira Kamal, Ramallah, 13 June 2007.

she argues, stands as 'a commentary on sacrifice'; they 'resonate with the honour that comes from ... resisting' (2000: 109). Women participate in this ritual in various ways: as mothers, 'they are a collective moral representation of a community testifying to the abusive nature of occupation' (2000: 119); and, on occasion, as victims themselves of beatings, arrest, and sexual threat. Because of their role as representatives of communal morality, I suggest, they see these humiliations as 'giving up something precious', a necessary sacrifice.

The sacrificial space is a contested area; within it, women's self-identification as agents tends to be constrained. In a familiar scenario, the woman subordinates her needs and rights to those of men; she sacrifices herself to enable the man to behave heroically. It is this conventional imagining of women that I seek to challenge through a more comprehensive conceptualisation of sacrifice. Nabila, who lives in an unregistered camp in southern Lebanon, recalled the 1982 Israeli invasion. They were living in shelters, she said, *'terrified that the Israelis would come and kill us. Many people were killed. People tried to run away but there were no cars [...] We were scared even to go for water. There was no food, no water, no school.'*<sup>9</sup> Her narrative evokes the victimisation of the sacrificial space, but also the 'paradoxical stream of everyday practice' (Jean-Klein 2001: 83); while this terrifying situation was far from 'everyday', women's responses, as NGO worker Fadwa pointed out, represented the normality and continuity of life.

But there is another gendered element, identified by Maha Abu-Dayyeh Shamas, who argues that Palestinian women 'are unable to express any of their suffering or anxiety, as they are forced into silence for fear of being blamed at the public level for being selfish and inconsiderate' (2003: 2). This silencing becomes apparent in the social constraints preventing mothers from openly mourning their martyred children, and has been doubly disempowering for women; while *um shaheed* (the 'mother of the martyr') is treated as a national icon, her symbolic participation in the process of nation-building was not considered 'sufficient grounds for having gender equality between men and women' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009: 96). This implies, on the one hand, that these mothers have been denied agency, but, on the other, that their sacrifice has been accorded dignity within the nationalist narrative. Salih puts some of the blame on scholarly work about gendered narratives that seem to suggest that women are not entirely comfortable with nationalist ways of 'telling the story'. Such research, she suggests, 'emphasized the trauma generated by the nationalist imperative to glorify martyrdom through bodily dispositions which required the silencing, if not the repression, of women's emotions, grief and pain' (2017: 746).

Shamas's and Shalhoub-Kevorkian's arguments suggest that men and women are

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, Kasmiye camp, 31 May 2003.

unequal in the public sphere because women's participation in the nation-building project is symbolic rather than real and also because women are accustomed to sacrificing their interests for the benefit of men. However, there is another level of reality in which the nation-building effort is an illusion and the public sphere superficial. This is illustrated by the assertion of NGO worker Fadwa that Palestinian women 'become more active during difficult times'; they move beyond symbolic participation. The flowering of agency was also highlighted by Amina in the Bourj el-Barajne camp.

In the absence of home and homeland, Palestinians have elaborated the notion of *sumud*, translated as 'taking action and seeking an ending to plights rather than just patiently enduring' what occupation or exile imposes (Alareer 2014: 529). *Sumud*, according to Ryan, 'offers a different way of thinking about resilience'; it enables Palestinians to develop 'flexible responses and tactics and is inherently flexible in that it encompasses a wide range of practices' (2015: 5). For Nina Gren, '*sumud*, or steadfastness, implies a certain political agency as well as tactics of resilience' (2015: 92). She adds that, in the occupied territories, 'many practices aimed at sustaining daily routine during crisis are considered part of *sumud*' (2015: 93); this echoes Salih's focus on 'the ordinary' (2017) and Jean-Klein's 'stream of everyday practice' (2001). Richter-Devroe argues that what she calls a 'new meaning of *sumud*' is about 'resisting immobility' (2011: 39). It is a method of survival but also part of a larger project of communal sacrifice.

## The Palestinian nation/community

The fragmented and dispersed 'Palestinian community' will be considered in terms of 'the "nation" as an ideological and political construct separate from that of the "nation-state"' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 15). The conception of 'the nation' as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) highlights 'the active role of discourse through which notions of national homogeneity, historic continuity and shared present and destiny are constituted' (Amer 2012: 117). Modern nationalism, suggests Zerubavel, is linked to the readiness of individuals 'to die for their nation'; it is 'a social and moral act that defies their instinct for personal survival in the name of the future of the collectivity' (2006: 73). His words resonate with what has been the Palestinian national experience since 1948. Edward Said (1989) refers to 'a collectivity or community finding its way together'. In his view, people 'do not find the courage to fight continually against as powerful an army as Israel's without some reservoir, some deeply and already present fund of bravery and revolutionary self-sacrifice'. Although a territorial Palestinian entity has not existed for over 70 years, the dream of 'return' is still 'a passionate sentiment around which [Palestinian] identity has been constructed' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 110). To better understand Palestinian women's involvement in 'patriotic sacrifice', it

is necessary to explore further the notion of community and how it binds Palestinians together as a resisting entity.

'The nation' is not gender-neutral and there is evidence that, in 1948, one of the reasons for Palestinian flight was the existence of 'gendered definitions of honour and shame, which compelled many men to move their families away from danger' (Humphries, Khalili 2007: 210). These men were not soldiers, but fathers, sons, and husbands keen to preserve female bodies from violation. Yet, according to what Judith Stiehm (1989) describes as 'the protected-protector myth', men were expected to fight for the sake of the 'womenandchildren' (Enloe 1990), to sacrifice themselves for the community and especially for the women of the community. In the words of elderly eye-witness Um Ahmed, now living in the al-Amiri refugee camp in Ramallah, people heard about the Deir Yassin massacre in May 1948; they heard how the Zionist fighters '*had slaughtered women, young men, old men*'. There was no possibility of fighting back, she insisted.<sup>10</sup> Thus, local people had no choice but to give up the one thing they valued above all else, their homeland. At the same time, their sacrifice has more complex dimensions. Conventionally, the status of 'warrior' bestows honour on the male. Beyond the battlefield, men 'are positioned as having a proprietary relationship over women national subjects and because of this are able to discipline women's practices concerning all manner of things' (Sharma 2006: 131). These 'things', one assumes, include men's right to act as sacrificial agents. However, in a reversal of conventional practice, the Palestinian 'warrior', far from enjoying an honourable position, has been defined as shameful, as a terrorist. His contested status has implications for the women of the community and has encouraged a broadening of the definition of 'sacrifice'.

The violence with which the Israeli state was formed in 1948 shattered Palestinian communal life, and this placed an additional burden on women. Not only were they expected to symbolise the traumatised and scattered nation, certain modes of proper behaviour were also demanded of them; in Sharma's words, men were able 'to discipline women's practices'. According to Amina, who lives in a refugee camp in Beirut:

*There is discrimination against women; they are always criticised and boys and girls are treated differently. Women are seen as weak, under the protection of men; this is what the generation raised in Palestine believed. But we are trying to change this; now women have a better role [...] they are in a better situation, more equal with men.<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Interview, al-Amiri camp, Ramallah, 17 June 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 1 June 2006.

This pattern of patriarchal power and responsibility is very familiar (see Kandiyoti 1988; White 1997); but, as Amina suggests, it has to some extent been subverted in the Palestinian case where women as social actors have a greater sense of inclusion in the 'threatened community', as Palestinians see it.

Because it has been difficult for Palestinian men to protect 'the motherland' or the female body from violation or conquest, a more nuanced model of community has emerged, in which men possess neither the means to exert meaningful control nor the power to 'discipline women's practices'. My own ethnographic research has involved interviewing Palestinian women in the occupied territories and the Diaspora. Their stories are conscious nationalist narratives, intended to keep alive the ideas of home and identity. This expression of nationalism celebrates women's 'active citizenship' (Hammami, Johnson 1999: 325). It also challenges the dominant image of victimisation. In the camps of Lebanon, for example, Palestinians display a strong sense of communal belonging and solidarity, despite the uncomfortable conditions in which they live. According to Um Mahmoud, who left Palestine when she was two months old: *'it is most important to live with one's own people, with relatives, friends and neighbours'*.<sup>12</sup> Um Walid, a midwife in her forties, agreed; the importance of the camp, she observed, *'is that I am with my people, we endure the same suffering; the aim is to be together and support each other; as refugees, this is very important. We cannot forget the cause; I love the camp more than outside; as long as I am here, I feel I am with the revolution'*.<sup>13</sup>

The camp, as Um Walid and other refugee women living in Lebanon make clear, represents a link to the Palestinian homeland; but even those still residing in the former British mandate territory of 'Palestine' no longer feel 'at home'. Palestinians complain that they are treated 'as fugitives in their own land' (Kearns 2007: 28); thus, the community, deprived of its national territory, is bereft and humiliated. I have tried to re-imagine this nation without territory in terms of a more encompassing communal solidarity inspired by the many-layered memories of women and the stories they tell. At the same time, I am heeding the advice of Amal Amireh, who warns against perpetuating 'deep-rooted assumptions about Arab women and their culture' (2005: 232). Such stereotypes are disrupted by the subtle reality of Palestinian women's lived experiences. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and for Palestinians outside the homeland, a particular 'discourse of nationalism' – or community – has taken shape; it is one in which women have long played a determined and dynamic role. They were active during the nationalist anti-colonial struggles of the first half of the 20th century (Fleischman 2003) and have continued to make their voices heard.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 27 January 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 2 June 2006.

They understand that, 'even when death is all around, it's stories that keep you alive' (Friedland 2016). I will now turn to some of these stories and apply the theoretical considerations of 'community' and 'sacrifice' to three models of female sacrifice.

### **Victimisation: the inadvertent sacrifice**

The distorted development of the Palestinian national community after 1948 has inevitably affected relations between men and women. Yet, while it is accurate to describe Palestinian society as 'patriarchal' and relatively conservative, women in this society have evolved a particular model of 'active citizenship' (Hammami, Johnson 1999). This can be explained, firstly, by the very restrictive conditions in which Palestinians live; and, secondly, by the fact that it is difficult for Palestinian men to perform the traditional role of protector. The familiar image of a Palestinian woman is that of a victim: a distraught mother mourning her dead son, for example, or a grieving widow. The Israeli occupation routinely fails to distinguish between men, women, and children, and many unarmed civilians have been killed in military action; these individuals, whatever their age, are celebrated as 'martyrs' who have sacrificed themselves for 'the nation'. Thus, a model of sacrifice has emerged that relies on the stoicism of individuals and their willingness – in the context of communal solidarity – to endure humiliation. It contributes to the construction of a 'resilient self', and under such circumstances 'the modality of power through which individuals transform themselves into the willing subjects of a moral discourse is the subject's agency' (Bracke 2016: 62–63). I argue here that 'sacrifice' is not merely 'stoicism' or 'victimisation', but involves a more conscious choice, to accept that one is giving up something precious for the sake of something even more valuable.

An example of inadvertent sacrifice is presented by Maha, a 30-year-old woman from Nablus in the West Bank. After her husband was arrested, the Israeli army demolished the family home, a common form of collective punishment. When her house was destroyed, she said, they did not allow her to take anything out of it. She asked if she could take her child's shoes but they refused. In her words: *'They came to the house at 3am; it was unexpected. They called everyone out of the house and told me to go with them to show them the house; I was like a human shield'*. At the time, she could not think of anything; she felt shocked. And she realised she had lost everything: all her memories, all her things, were gone. She had become a 'person without history'.

Although Maha felt victimised by the Israeli authorities through no fault of her own, she quickly rejected the label of victim. There was no time to feel homeless, she told me. She had to do something, so she moved to Ramallah with her children,

found a job, and they began to rebuild their life.<sup>14</sup> Maha's response is a clear demonstration of agency and initiative. It also builds on notions of sacrifice in several ways: Maha's husband had been removed from the family and the family home had been destroyed, along with the precious memories it contained, and yet she was able to gather her children and her sense of obligation to 'get on with life' and rise above immensely adverse conditions.

Another commentary on inadvertent sacrifice comes from Wissam, aged 54, who lived most of her life in the Palestinian Yarmouk camp in Damascus. Forced to flee from Syria in the face of escalating violence, she now lives in one small room in the Bourj el-Barajne camp in Beirut, with her two adult sons. Wissam, like Maha, has exhibited extraordinary resilience. Her story gives an indication of the sacrifices she has made for her children and her community. When she was 23 years old, she was forced to marry a much older man; she did not love her husband, who treated her badly. After his death, she was left to raise her children alone and this task became even more precarious when she had to leave her home in Syria. Like Maha, Wissam has displayed qualities of determination and enterprise; since arriving in Beirut, for example, she has made a modest living by selling clothing.<sup>15</sup> The two women would not, I think, describe their actions as 'sacrifice', but rather as 'becoming responsible'. However, I think their lived experiences can be defined as 'sacrificial acts' in the sense that, firstly, they do not have a choice and, secondly, their exemplary actions help to strengthen the community by constructing a 'resilient self'. Their experiences reflect the selfless sacrifices women have always made

A final and more contested form of inadvertent sacrifice is embodied by the sacrificing mother, in reference to Allen's observation that 'mothers who send their sons off to war are also honoured' (2004). Although many women are satisfied with their traditional roles as wives and mothers as the foundation of communal solidarity, this involves a complex network of obligations. Fisher refers to one woman, 'the mother of three Hamas supporters who were all killed by Israelis, and who was later quoted as saying that "she wished she had 100 sons to sacrifice that way"' (2006). This woman's defiant words pay homage to Yasser Arafat's exhortation in 2002: 'Women and men are equal', he declared to a crowd of over 1,000 women. '[You] are the hope of Palestine who will liberate your husbands, fathers and sons from oppression. You will sacrifice the way you, women, have always sacrificed for your family' (quoted in Kaufman and Williams 2013: 101). His words highlight the paradoxical nature of sacrifice: on the one hand, women are portrayed as 'unnatural mothers' for celebrating the martyrdom of their sons, while, on the other, they are urged to sacrifice

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<sup>14</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Beirut, 5 June 2015.

as 'women have always sacrificed'. In both scenarios, they are denied the dignity of agency. Yet, as the examples of Maha and Wissam demonstrate, women build their own 'resilient selves' by quietly re-appropriating and redefining 'their occupied, fragmented and dispossessed spaces' (Richter-Devroe 2011: 39).

I interviewed Um Nabil, a 48-year old woman in Hebron about her son, a Hamas fighter, who was killed by the Israelis. Um Nabil was very proud of her son and the sacrifice he had made for his community; she told me he had always talked about becoming a *shaheed*. The story she told of her son and his 'sacrificial act' was a demonstration of the public and united face of the Palestinian community and her own role as a 'quintessential sacrificing mother' (Marway 2011: 228). However, Um Nabil asserted agency when she added that '*women can also become martyrs*'. If a woman kills herself, '*it is because she had a bad experience with Israel*'.<sup>16</sup> Um Nabil's narrative of sacrifice casts doubt on the suggestion that self-sacrificing women have been coerced or manipulated by men.

Israeli popular discourse has chosen to characterise Palestinian sacrifice as 'terrorism', for example, in the claim that 'creating a supportive social environment ... has been a critical factor in the Palestinian Authority's successful promotion of suicide terrorism'. To this end, 'PA policy has been to honour terrorists as Shahids (Martyrs), and to teach Palestinian mothers to celebrate when their children die as terrorist Shahids' (Palestinian Media Watch n/d). These assertions are illustrated by images of the mothers or widows of Palestinian martyrs, who speak proudly of their sacrifice. For example, in September 2014, Palestinian television reported the mother of a 16-year old boy, killed in a riot in Jerusalem, as proclaiming: 'This is the first time I see joy in my heart. This is the first time I see such joy. Thank Allah for giving him martyrdom'. Women martyrs are also not mourned but celebrated. In the words of one family member: 'Why should we cry? It is like her wedding day, the happiest day of her life' (quoted in Marway 2011: 227). Here, as with Um Nabil, we see the public face of sacrifice at odds with private sorrow. Yet these women's reactions, while confirming Shamas's observation about women being 'forced into silence', also – paradoxically – demonstrate the construction of the resilient female self.

### **'Unnatural' sacrifice: the violent woman**

She's the mother of the martyr, sister of the martyr, daughter of the martyr – and now she is the martyr herself (Hasso 2005: 34)

The second category I will discuss considers the notion of 'patriotic sacrifice' and the

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Hebron, November 2007.

'deep sense of indebtedness to those who died for the homeland' (Zerubavel 2006: 76). It has been described as the 'unnatural' sacrifice, the deliberate actions of the so-called 'terrorist' woman. In recent years, women too have started to make 'the highest ethical gesture' in the form of suicide bombings. Reactions to these women have ranged from horror at the 'unnaturalness' of their acts to pity for them as the victims of controlling men. Their 'selflessness' and 'sacrifice' are rarely acknowledged. However, rather than judging female suicide bombers as 'scandalous subwomen' or 'sublime superwomen' (Marway 2011), 'virtuous heroines or damaged goods' (Schweitzer 2008), or 'mothers, monsters or whores' (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015), we should acknowledge that women, like men, may be motivated by 'political goals [...] and a desire to protect loved ones' (Kruger, quoted by Skaine 2006: 35); in other words, 'neither masculinized agency nor feminized helplessness are appropriate for understanding people's political violence' (Gentry, Sjoberg 2015: 149).

The desire to 'protect loved ones' can be observed in the different ways women and men have attempted to assert their independence as a nation. The argument that women tend to be more comfortable with non-violent resistance, as we saw in the Ain el-Hilwe camp in 1982, is partially correct, but it would be a mistake to ignore other forms of sacrifice. There have been notable women fighters; several women I met in Lebanon, for example, proudly recounted their own experiences as militant resisters. Abir lives in the Rashidiyya camp in southern Lebanon. She told me that in the early 1980s she was fighting against Israel in a cell that comprised young men and women together. Eventually, she said, they were all arrested and she was subjected to torture; the Israelis '*put a sack over my head*', she recalled, '*and tied my hands behind my back [...] They threatened to bring my fiancé. They hit me. For ten days, I remained with the sack on my head and my hands tied.*'<sup>17</sup> While her experience sounds extreme and threatening, it fits into a larger pattern of 'becoming responsible'. It should be noted, too, that the sacrifice of a woman's own life or the lives of her loved ones is an unsettling and undesirable option for Palestinians, not something to be relished. The perceived extremity of their situation and the lack of adequate international safeguards have compelled them to embrace an uneasy empowerment, and this has resulted in some hard choices for women.

There have been many female martyrs in Palestinian history, but none have been more contentious than the female suicide bomber, a figure that challenges the image of Muslim and Arab women that is dominant in a western context, 'as docile bodies' (Amireh 2005: 230). As Amireh argues, while the 'oppressed body of the Muslim woman was [...] offered as an important reason to justify a war', the female suicide bomber's body is 'purposeful, lethal, and literally explosive' (2005: 230); it disturbs

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, Rashidiyya camp, 5 June 2003.

preconceptions about the selfless and victimised Palestinian woman, as embodied in Maha's and Wissam's narratives. But this image also raises other questions.

Defined as 'a violent, politically motivated attack' (Bloom 2005: 19), Palestinian suicide bombings are routinely equated with terrorism. The Islamist group Hamas, seen as the primary proponent of this type of asymmetrical warfare, has been placed by the United States and the European Union on their lists of banned organisations. Far from committing an 'ethical gesture' that 'expects no benefit in return', Hamas has been accused of playing a 'spoiler role' (Bloom 2005: 20) in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Sacrifice in the context of 'Islamic terrorism' is identified as 'a bad thing, not something to be proud of or to support' (Primoratz 2013: 7). The reality is that Hamas is by no means the only Palestinian party that recognises the inevitability of 'martyrdom'; given the unbalanced nature of the conflict, Palestinians argue that they have few tools at their disposal other than their own bodies. Hamas acknowledges that men and women have the right to practice resistance; however, while women 'are supposed to wage *jihad* by imbuing their children with Islamic values [...] *jihad* [...] calls for men to take up arms' (Mazurana 2013: 164). Like Um Nabil, Reem, a West Bank journalist sees it differently; in her words: '*the Jihad movement sent women on martyrdom operations. They see the girl and the boy in this way; they see it as a higher form of jihad, to choose to die for Palestinians under Israeli occupation is the bravest thing*'.<sup>18</sup> This contradicts the more familiar 'wisdom' of women being used for violent operations because they are 'more likely to get through checkpoints' or 'to produce greater press interest and audience response' (Thrift 2007: 278).

As Reem made clear, Palestinian women have not shunned direct action, despite the supposedly rigid patriarchal structures that frame their lives. In January 2009, the US television programme CBS News aired a story entitled 'Hamas TV Pictures Promote Female Suicide Bombers Squad'. It showed a photograph in which three women are seen posing in front of a Hamas banner, their arms resting on Kalashnikov rifles. In an accompanying statement, one of the women said that she was a mother of two 'martyrs' and noted that Palestinian women are ready to 'make the ultimate sacrifice' to stop Israel moving into Gaza (Kaufman and Williams 2013: 100). In this example, honour and sacrifice are closely linked, which raises the key question of how Palestinians address the challenge of belonging to a community judged to be 'dishonourable' in its motives and practice.

There have been numerous studies about the reasons why women might opt for this 'unwomanly' form of sacrifice (Oliver 2008; O'Rourke 2009; Berko, Erez 2005, 2008; Bloom 2007; Hasso 2005; Israeli 2004), which challenges 'beyond repair' the image of woman 'as the symbolic nurturer, healer, and spiritual mother of the nation'

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.



(Naaman 2008: 116). Feminist writer Phyllis Chesler has described suicide bombings by women as 'another form of Arab honor killing' (2004). For Rachel Bell, female suicide bombers 'are motivated by anger, hate and revenge' (2014). Others see their actions as proof of women's subjection to men or evidence of their failure in more traditional feminine pursuits. In Cindy Ness's words, 'each suicide bomber was chosen because in some way she failed to meet or deviated from gender expectation' (2008: 28; see also Victor 2004). In other words, they are choosing martyrdom 'as a way to escape the predestined life that is expected of them' (Beyler 2003: 1). In this scenario, rather than making a choice to sacrifice themselves, women are treated as victims of their own culture; they are denied agency. This reduction of women to the categories of 'mother, monster or whore' has been challenged by Gentry and Sjoberg who argue these narratives are 'reflections of and reproducers of gender-subordinating social structures' (2015: 147).

Karla Cunningham suggests that evolutionary theory can help to explain political violence involving female actors. In her view, it accounts for the mobilisation of women into violent behaviour 'while retaining and maintaining existing sociocultural gendered frameworks of public and private, male and female' (2009: 562). Her claim echoes Julia Kristeva's observation that women 'are sent off to sacrifice and martyrdom in imitation of the warlike man and possessor of power' (2002) and Laster and Erez's concern about 'exceptional circumstances when patriarchy lets women into what has typically been men's business' (2015: 83). Again, this suggests a lack of agency and portrays the Palestinian community as 'a male entity which victimizes its female subjects' (Auchter 2012: 127). But this analysis is at odds with Giles's (2003: 1) understanding of war as 'a time of release'.

As their own statements attest, women who choose this mode of sacrifice have strong reasons for doing so. For example, in a conversation with her uncle, Dareen Abu Aysheh, a 21-year-old woman who blew herself up at an Israeli army checkpoint, killing herself and injuring four other people, asked 'aren't we being shot down like dogs? Do you feel like a human being when the Israelis control your every move? Do you believe we have a future? If I'm going to die at their hands anyway, why shouldn't I take some of them with me?' (Williams 2002). The dismissal of this form of 'patriotic sacrifice', as brainwashing or perversion, appears to disregard the larger narrative and the perceived threat to Palestinian national existence. It locates women's motivations in mundane concerns; whereas, in reality, the reasons for their actions are more complex. If we judge by the evidence they left behind, 'nationalism is emphasized as their motive' (Amireh 2005: 241). For example, Fatma al-Najar, an elderly woman who blew herself up in Gaza in 2006, slightly injuring three Israeli soldiers, acted, we are told, out of religious conviction and dedication to 'the nation'. She was 'acting responsibly', as a 'liberated female warrior' (Marway 2011: 228). As

Gaza psychiatrist Eyad El Sarraj observes, there is a heroism in 'dying for others, of not accepting humiliation and defeat' (2002). This is consistent with the notion of 'patriotic sacrifice' articulated by Zerubavel.

### **Non-violent forms of sacrifice**

These accounts of self-sacrifice highlight the role of agency and women's negotiations with notions of morality and appropriate behaviour. But there are other forms of communal solidarity and sacrifice that are not overtly violent; and these forms shed light on the 'commentary on sacrifice' to which Peteet refers. This type of sacrifice perhaps sits more comfortably with women, who tend to be associated with caring roles and 'selfless' acts. In her discussion of Palestinian women's efforts to 'enjoy life', Richter-Devroe refers to women's 'hybrid subjectivities and their ambiguous forms of agency' (2011: 36). They endure the humiliations of the occupation, as Maha's life story demonstrated, or respond violently to being 'shot down like dogs', in Dareen Abu Aysheh's words. But women are also involved in the resistance against occupation and dispossession 'through their roles in child rearing and socialisation'. They have 'entered the battle in Palestine' and 'are supporting their husbands and sons' and, for these women, it is 'a national and religious obligation and sacrifice' (Pratt 2012: 1826).

The 'high point of Palestinian women's involvement in nonviolent activities', according to Nuseibeh, was during the first *intifada* of 1987, 'as women took prominent roles in leading demonstrations, setting up popular relief committees as nonviolent alternatives to the constantly encroaching Israeli system, and running both families and institutions while Palestinian men were arrested in droves' (2002). Another example of women's non-violent but highly effective activities, as Fadwa, the NGO worker in Beirut observed, occurred during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when Palestinian refugee women performed countless vital functions, often at great personal expense.

The role of women, explained Suhair, a resident of the Ain el-Hilweh refugee camp in southern Lebanon, was '*to take care of their families after the imprisonment of the men*'. Women worked to rebuild the destroyed camps, she said, sometimes with their bare hands.<sup>19</sup> They organised 'demonstrations and marches to protest the arrest or disappearance of their sons and husbands' (Peteet 2002: 139). Such accounts of non-violent sacrifice illustrate the determination displayed by many women during this period. Their work was social but also political, and their behaviour, as in the Palestinian territories, challenged traditional forms of social control and the patriarchal character of society. As they grieved over the loss of their private spaces, the

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, Ain el-Hilweh, Sidon, June 2003.



agency of these women was expressed 'in their striving to reinvent or renegotiate boundaries of privacy [...] across a space that is constantly curtailed, and a time that unfolds as a series of violent events' (Salih 2016: 748). Some of the actions or concerns of women would have no place if observed simply 'through the prism of the heroic sacrifice for the nationalist cause' (Salih 2016: 753). Theirs is the 'everyday practice' to which Jean-Klein refers, which revolves around concern for their husband and children, a sense of responsibility to the larger community, and a desire to live the best life possible in exile (Mason 2007).

Another 'commentary on sacrifice' took place in 2006, when the Israeli military besieged a mosque in the Gaza Strip. Hamas MP Aisha Shanti led a huge demonstration where '*thousands of women risked their lives to protect and save men*'.<sup>20</sup>

This sort of response is not uncommon. In June 2007, violent clashes erupted between Fatah and Hamas for control of Gaza. Many Gazans, horrified by the violence, took to the streets to protest. According to former Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) member Dalal Salameh, women played a key role in these confrontations. They tried to prevent the factions from firing at each other. The women '*behaved as nationalists and were courageous*', she said.<sup>21</sup> These events illustrate both a deterioration of communal solidarity and also female action as a form of sacrifice. By raising their voices and risking their lives, women sought to defuse the tension inherent in intra-Palestinian violence; in René Girard's (1987) words, they were 'protecting the community from its own violence'. Butler refers to 'a new subject' emerging from the ravages of war, a subject who might be able to 'traverse the splitting between public and private' (2010: 155).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the claim that 'Palestinian women tend to become more active during difficult times'. To address the question of what 'becoming more active' means, I constructed a theoretical framework around the concept of 'sacrifice', arguing that the definition needs to be broadened to encompass violent and non-violent forms. 'Sacrifice', I argue, is the most appropriate way of understanding how Palestinians deal with the traumas of insecurity and exile. Although, as a community, they are often imagined as being imprisoned in a narrative of defeat, they are not without choice. One of the choices they make is 'to give up something precious' for the sake of something that is of greater value. The thing of value could be their bodily integrity, their security, or even their own life; and the thing of greater

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dr Islah Jad, Ramallah, 31 October 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Nablus, June 2007.

value is national liberation, return, and an end to the humiliation of occupation. The process of striving towards their desired objective, I suggest, is embodied in various forms of resistance. I analysed the Palestinian nation, or community, and, based on my own fieldwork I focused on one part of it – women. Here the picture becomes more complicated as female sacrifice is somewhat different to that of men. In order to gain a clearer picture, I explored women's agency in the context of conflict. One of the forms of sacrifice available to them is through the 'stream of everyday practice' and the struggle 'to live the best life possible'; this can be interpreted as 'resistance', but is better described as sacrificing something precious.

The framework was tested with reference to the life experiences of Palestinian women in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in the refugee camps of Lebanon. In these environments, as I outlined, women have acted as sacrificial agents, both deliberately – as protesters, defenders, and martyrs – and inadvertently – as victims and by-standers. Their commitment to building the 'resilient self' and protecting their community has demonstrated convincingly that women are victims neither of patriarchy nor of coercive male actors; rather, they are agents, articulating 'their own complex, realistic narrative to explain their own evolving conditions and to legitimate their own aspirations' (Enloe 2006: ix). Palestinian women represent an illuminating case study through which to test arguments about changing gender dynamics in conflict-afflicted societies. They have claimed a central place in the national project through their resistance activities and their willingness to sacrifice themselves.

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