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No to femicide in Palestine!

A new generation of Palestinian activists sees the fight against gendered violence on a par with the struggle for independence

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In late September, thousands of people in twelve cities in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel and the Palestinian diaspora demonstrated against femicide and violence against women in Palestinian society. The grassroots alliance 'Tal'at' had called for the protests under the slogan 'No liberated homeland without liberated women'.

Tal'at means 'They stand up' or 'They go out into the street'. With their slogans, the female and male activists showed that they are not prepared to subordinate their fight for women's rights and against gendered violence to the pursuit of political independence. But by contextualising the two issues, they were able to secure a place for their demands on the political agenda.

The 26 September 'day of action' marked the culmination of a series of protests triggered by the death of 21-year-old Israa Ghrayeb from Beit Sahour, a suburb of Bethlehem. Israa's family claimed that the young woman had fallen from her balcony and then died of a stroke after being treated in hospital. But the demonstrators accused the family of brutally murdering Israa after, on Instagram, she posted a video of her with a man she was engaged but not married with.

Israa worked as a makeup artist and was a well-known beauty and fashion blogger. While still in hospital, she posted a message to 12,000 Instagram followers that she had to cancel appointments in August and September, adding: 'Don't send me messages telling me to be strong. I am strong. May God be the judge of those who oppressed me and hurt me.'

The lack of statistics

Israa's case sparked discussions on social media, especially in Arab

countries, about gender-based violence after activists shared a nurse's video in which male relatives of the hospitalised woman can be heard abusing Israa. Under the hashtags, 'We are all Israa' and 'Justice for Israa', tens of thousands of people demanded in both Arabic and English that the case be investigated, insisting that there's nothing honourable about 'honour killings'. In Beit Sahour and other West Bank cities, activists began organising demonstrations and vigils to demand increased protection for women and tougher laws.

In fact, after protests outside his office in Ramallah, Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh declared on Facebook: 'We must strengthen legislation to protect Palestinian women.' But the barriers to better protecting women from femicide and domestic violence and tightening the laws are high, and not only because of resistance from socially conservative elites.

The activists stress that violence against women and LGBT people is a global problem that has been exacerbated in Palestine by the external violence of the Israeli occupation.

For a start, there are hardly any statistics on femicides and gendered violence in Palestinian society. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics' most recent figures date from 2011, when it found that 37 per cent of Palestinian women experienced gendered violence, with the figure for Gaza as high as 51 per cent.

For 2018, the Jerusalem-based Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling recorded 23 cases of women murdered by family members in the West Bank and Gaza. As is often true with respect to this type of violence, the number of unreported cases is probably higher. In Israa's case, activists also accuse the authorities and medical staff of not questioning the family's account of Israa's fall, and thereby helping cover up the fact that she'd been murdered.

No independence without women's liberation

In the West Bank, if femicide in the family is actually prosecuted, defendants usually get more lenient sentences than for other murders. Courts apply a law from when Jordan occupied the West Bank between 1948 and 1967 that grants leniency to men who kill female relatives.

It's not at all clear that the Palestinian Legislative Council will oppose this practice any time soon – not least because the Palestinian Authority

parliament has not met since the Hamas-Fatah unity government collapsed in 2007. At most, President Mahmoud Abbas could invoke emergency measures to change the law. He has declared the investigation of Israa Ghrayeb's death a priority – but not submitted any new bill.

Even if strengthening the law is still a long way off, 26 September was a success for Tal'at: Mobilising thousands of demonstrators to fight against femicide and gendered violence is not a given in the Palestinian political arena. Tal'at was reproached that its concerns should be subordinated to the bigger issue of political independence.

'Some people say, "Our priority is ending the occupation. Then we can deal with women's or LGBT rights",' explains Maisan, who comes from near Haifa and organised the demonstrations in Berlin. 'But we cannot address oppression and violence in isolation. I do not want to end the occupation and have to live in a society that rejects me and where I cannot express myself as I want.'

The activists stress that violence against women and LGBT people is a global problem that has been exacerbated in Palestine by the external violence of the Israeli occupation. Both Israa Ghrayeb's murder and the case of the Palestinian transgender teenager attacked by his brother in early August must be understood in the context of the structural violence of the conflict. Maisan says Tal'at has succeeded in linking the fight for women's and LGBT rights with a new inclusive movement against the Israeli occupation.



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