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## **Women's Experiences in Colonial Prisons: Engendering Hunger Strikes<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Women have regularly resorted to hunger strikes as tools of active resistance. Using feminist anthropology and interview data, this article investigates the gendered dimension of prison resistance. It focuses on hunger striking as a means to address harsh conditions in Israeli prisons, drawing on several other cases from Ireland to the United States to explore the gendered nature of resistance to political imprisonment. I argue that women hunger strikers are, active participants who weaponize their lives to resist the Israeli matrix of power and the patriarchal societal norms. There have been less women in number when compared to male prisoners, but women have been more effective in collectively conducting/coordinating their pioneering action and in learning new means of resistance. Through necroresistance (transforming their body to a site of resistance) and the strategy of *sumud* (Arabic for 'steadfastness'), women prisoners practice a dual and dual resistance of the colonial authorities and the patriarchal society – simultaneously reclaiming ownership of their bodies and lives from both systems, even if this means their death or exclusion from their society. This does not entail constituting their bodies as masculine (or de-feminizing themselves) so they are protected from sexual abuse. Rather, they insist on feminizing their experience *and* challenging gendered stereotypes of women as 'victims' with 'fragile bodies'. For them, gender is not a barrier but a motivational factor in which self-sacrifice to protest injustice is far superior to enduring the wrongs of political imprisonment. By turning their bodies into sites of resistance, they resist the necropolitical matrix of power (the use of social and political power to determine how prisoners might live or die) and assert individual feminine power against colonial and patriarchal injustices.

### **Key words**

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all data is based on interviews. The author approaches the topic from a scholarly point of view and does not necessarily agree with all data.

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Hunger strikes, Palestine, Israeli prisons, resistance, body, gender, necroresistance, and sumud.

## **Introduction**

While embarking on a hunger strike, an Israeli interrogator told Palestinian prisoner H Y, as she relayed to me in an interview in 2017: ‘You will never get married. You will never get pregnant. Your body will be destroyed. Your society will abandon you.’ For the Israeli interrogator, H Y is de-feminizing her body and putting it at risk of damage, simply stressing the patriarchal gendered stereotypes of *fragile* women bodies that are not masculine (strong) enough to embark on hunger strikes. H Y still continued her strike and demanded her release, a demand she achieved forty-seven days into the strike. Her case and that of women hunger strikers more broadly, has not received enough scholarly attention. This is despite history records that tell us about women who have resorted to hunger strikes to claim ownership of their bodies and lives in unique and unprecedented ways, from the British suffragettes in the first decade of the twentieth century to Palestinian, Irish, and Kurdish prisoners in the second half of the twentieth century.

This article examines those gendered dimension of hunger strikes. It shows how the action is used as a last resort and a bodily means of resistance, to address Palestinian women’s harsh conditions in Israeli prisons. Among the other prison resistance methods used are non-compliance with the rules of the Israeli Prison Service (IPS). Prisoners also use their time for education. Isolated from the normal life routine, the prisons continue to be an education hub where prisoners organise study circles and embroidery classes and teach the illiterate among them how to read and write. Hunger strikes come last, since they are a risky step that could easily take lives and if not, leave bodies suffering physical and mental damage, especially if conducted for lengthy periods.

I argue that women hunger strikers are *active* participants and like all other organized, active political protesters, they have political objectives that they want to achieve, power structures that they want to challenge and alternative ones that they want to create. In the Palestinian case, active prison resistance are a way through which women prisoners weaponize their lives through necroresistance, faced with only two choices: freedom or death. Necroresistance transforms prisoners’ bodies from sites of subjection to sites of resistance, which ‘by self-destruction presents death as a

counterconduct to the administration of life'.<sup>3</sup> By necroresistance, prisoners also seek to seize the power of life and death not only from the colonial state but also from the patriarchal society, thus establishing an *active* counter to sovereign power. Such acts invert the concept of sovereignty, bringing it from the level of the nation-state to a human and personal one by reclaiming agency of the body against a power the seeks to administer it.

As a Palestinian scholar, the topic of political imprisonment has been central to my upbringing. At a young age, one family member served a short period in Israeli prison for his role in the first Intifada. Since then, hearing about new orders of detention has become the norm. Some of those stories were of family members, neighbours, and colleagues spending longer periods of several years in Israeli prisons. Political imprisonment is part of the daily life of many Palestinians. My Palestinian nationality served as a common point of reference with the former political prisoners that I interviewed. I had worked with prisoners in a professional capacity and as an activist and this gave me familiarity with the culture and language of those I researched, helping to keep up-to-date with the constantly changing methods of interrogation, imprisonment conditions, and the dynamics of hunger strikes. This work experience also forms an important part of my methodology, awareness, and empathy with the interviewees' past ordeals. Having this experience facilitated my conversations with prisoners and it eliminated the tension that often occurs when researching such sensitive issues.

By examining a detailed record of the use of the body as a site of resistance to Israeli violence, I argue that hunger strikes continue to function as one of the primary tools of active resistance in Palestine. Drawing on the stories of women Palestinian prisoners, I argue that, due to their collective coordination and organizing, women have been more effective than their male counterparts in achieving their political goals. The timeline for this study is 1988, when women individual hunger strikes were first documented, until 2012. Specifically, I examine the details of three cases – that of Itaf Elyan (1988), Mona Qa'dan (1999) and, to a lesser extent, Hana Shalabi (2012). It is not possible to cover all the Palestinian hunger strikes in detail, but these are the most prominent cases of women hunger strikers. Before examining those cases in detail, it is important to note that this article focuses on political dynamics and actual outcomes of

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<sup>3</sup> Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 85.

hunger strikes, rather than the motives of those who undertake the strikes. I begin with a brief historical section on women's resistance to Israeli colonial policies and the patriarchal society in Palestine followed by an examination of the gendered nature of Israeli prisons. I then explain how the female body is used by Israeli authorities as a site of subjection, before moving on to a case study of the way women prisoners transform their bodies to sites of resistance by employing hunger strikes, the ultimate definition of necroresistance.

### **Women's Resistance in Palestine**

Even though the price of joining the anti-colonial struggle is high for women in the Palestinian patriarchal society, they still have led the way in resistance in unparalleled and effective ways. Palestinian women's use of their bodies as sites of protest is part of a broader dynamic of Palestinian struggle for justice and freedom. Historically, they have played an integral role in resistance: on the streets, among peers in classrooms, and in grassroots organizing, transcending borders and barriers created by the colonial state and the Palestinian society. Notably, they often face a lower risk of detention, and have used this 'privilege' to protect males from detention and to substitute for many "male roles" when men are detained. Of the first recorded protest that exemplifies this is a collective hunger strike by women (in solidarity with male prisoners) in February 1969. It was led by a group of women from Rafah and Khan Yunis, southern Gaza. The women went to the Israeli prison in Gaza city to see their menfolk because they had heard that they were being tortured, but they were not allowed in. They tried to storm the prison and the Israelis shot at them and killed three protestors and wounded thirteen. In response, at least ninety women staged a hunger strike in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Jerusalem) for two nights and three days, to protest the mistreatment of men in Israeli prisons and the occupation as a whole. The army came and said, 'It is not prayer time and we see some of you are Muslim [because of the headscarves] and this is not your place. Go to the mosque, get out, you have no right to be in a church'. The women replied, 'We refuse to discriminate. Muslim and Christian, we all respect this place'.<sup>4</sup> On the third day, the Israeli authorities locked the door of the Holy Sepulcher for the first time in recorded history. Arab mayors and Muslim and Christian clergy asked the women to end the strike, promising to continue to pressure for their claims. After the strike

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<sup>4</sup> Issam Abdel-Hadi in Soraya Antonius, 'Prisoners for Palestine: A list of Women Political Prisoners', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9, no. 3 (1980): 37.

was called to an end, Israeli soldiers arrested Issam Abdel-Hadi, who was a participant in the protest, with her daughter on March 13.<sup>5</sup> What is important to note here is how the women's act of resistance (through the strike) evoked not only a violent colonial response but also pressure from male mayors and clergies. The use of men by Israeli forces to force women to put an end to their resistance tactics is not unique to this incident, as the case of Itaf Elyan shows (see below).

In prisons, the women experience is not homogenous. In the majority of cases, female prisoners spend less time in prisons than do males. Whether short or long, however, one needs to 'understand that prison and jail' experience in its totality is about 'control and de-humanizing', said American ex-political prisoner Laura Whitehorn.<sup>6</sup> And while various experiences are universal, transcending borders, genders, cultures and times – others are unique to specific contexts. This, nevertheless, does not blur gender differences but rather heightens them. Within Israeli prisons, Palestinian women have been fewer in number overall than male prisoners.<sup>7</sup> According to Addameer Organization (April 2020), there are 4700 Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons, 39 of which are female. While men are spread across Israeli prisons, until 2004, women were held in only one Israeli facility (Neve Tirza in the city of Ramleh). Today, they are held in two prisons: Hasharon and Damon.<sup>8</sup>

This concentration of the prison population gives women prisoners an opportunity to coordinate much better and organize more effectively than men, who sometimes find it hard to do the same in such large numbers. It is not, however, mainly about numbers. One cannot fully understand the experience of female prisoners without looking at the societal perception of their resistance. Their role is societally perceived as one that is about reproduction and motherhood that ensures the continuing existence of the nation, binding women to their primitively sexual nature.<sup>9</sup> This patriarchal relegation of women's function to what is deemed "appropriate" associates femininity with weakness, even though the process of bearing and giving birth to children requires an immense amount of strength and tolerance to pain that surpasses male capacities. When women are imprisoned, their experience becomes vital to their society but only to an extent. Their share in resistance is often minimized and belittled,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid 4, pp. 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Whitehorn, 'Surviving Solitary', *The Fire Inside* 49, (Fall 2013/Winter 2014): 11.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, statistics in other countries show a much smaller number of females put in prisons (including the official US and US statistics) and this is always for less violent charges.

<sup>8</sup> Sahar Francis, 'Gendered Violence in Israeli Detention', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46, no. 4 (2017): 53. Addameer Organization 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Megan O'Branski. 'The Savage Reduction of the Flesh: Violence, Gender and Bodily Weaponization in the 1981 Irish Republican Hunger Strike Protest', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, no. 1 (2014): 9.

constantly judged by male counterparts. Hence, weaponizing their lives through hunger strikes is not only a challenge to the necropolitical colonial system (the use of social and political power to determine how and when they may live and die) but also to the patriarchal systems that limit their roles to reproduction, thus re-enforcing gendered stereotypes of women as victims and weak.

Those societal roles still exist and are partly why women's roles continue to be limited in combat and to a lesser extent in activism, and they, as a result, continue to be imprisoned in smaller numbers. There are, however, other reasons women are not fully integrated in combat roles. One is about the perception of their body as not masculine enough to tolerate hardship. This means their constant exclusion from various forms of resistance, especially those that rely on the body. Based on a survey carried out in 2009, Bilal Awad Salameh shows only 10 out of 451 (2.2%) Palestinians tasked by military wings of five political parties to carry militant operations were women, the first of which was Itaf Elyan in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> This exclusion of women is not unique to Palestinian society. During the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) hunger strike of 1981, a call for volunteers was made to encourage prisoners to join the strike. Women who volunteered, such as the three women of Armagh Goal, however, were excluded,<sup>11</sup> for the sole reason of being women. As O'Branski further argues, the 1981 Irish Republican Hunger Strike Protest weaponized their lives by reclaiming and 're-inscribing them as masculine and abject', which involved excluding bodies that are not masculine enough to deal with the protest,<sup>12</sup> as if women were incapable of using their minds to govern their own bodies. This claim is further stressed by Groebner who noted that there are commonly held notions that the *small* and *fragile* bodies of women is more susceptible to suffering than those of *robust* men.<sup>13</sup> Such notions need to be read as a reminder of the masculine position in a society that looks down on women and which sees their bodies as limited in capacity and weak.

The notion of belittling women and their bodies is also clear in organizations that adopt the 'resistance discourse' in Palestine. I once attended a talk by a senior leader of a Gaza-based resistance organization and asked him, why do you not let women join combat operations like you do for men? 'When men disappear' he responded, 'we will allow women

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<sup>10</sup> Salameh Bilal Awad, 'The Palestinian Martyrdom Operations: The Evolution of Body as a Means of Resistance' in *The Palestinian Cause, A spot of light in a dark Arab reality*, The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, (2015), 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 9, p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 9, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> Groebner Valentin, 'Schock, Abscheu, schickes Thema. Warum arbeiten die Kulturwissenschaften im 21. Jahrhundert u'ber Gewalt der Vormoderne?' *Zeitschrift fu'r Ideengeschichte* 1, no. 3 (2007): 70-83.

in', clearly reflecting the stance of not only the group to which he belonged but the bigger patriarchal society in which it is embedded, and which confines women to domestic roles. This relegation of women in the resistance and the suppression of their potential capacities is driven in part by a strong fear of captivity. The connection between captivity and gender is typically centered around the fear of being sexually abused. This threat hangs over women from the moment they are captured. The society as a whole is fearful of it. As Mona Qa'dan relayed to me in an interview in 2020,

The view of Palestinian families, and our society more broadly, is that women in prisons are harassed sexually. Even though this is not true, the society is not getting it yet. When a woman prisoner is freed, the first question she is asked is, 'What happened to you'? It is as if every single woman went through the same experience which makes families panic as soon as women are imprisoned. Such rumours do not help.

Importantly, these rumours are not only a product of the Palestinian society but also of the Israeli colonial forces that are in constant search for ways to prevent all form of resistance, which leads to prison harassment. In prisons, threats of sexual abuse are constant and are perceived as a great danger for women and the honour of their families. The dominant culture which shapes Palestinian society views women's roles, legally and socially, in the context of their tenuous status when taken captive then freed, because it is always assumed they may have been raped. Rape in this context serves several purposes and demonstrates men's power and control over women's bodies. Such preconceptions are often exploited by Israeli prison authorities to force women to collaborate and confess since they understand that the assumption itself of rape might affect women's status in their society even if no attempt is made to verify whether a woman was raped or not. Once freed, women may be exploited as additional wives to married men. If married, it may be difficult to return to their husbands who would marry again, as in the case of Esraa al-Jaabis. If unmarried, they may not be able to marry. If engaged, their fiancé may leave them.

In contrast, women wait for their fiancés and husbands sometimes for years, if not decades. Shatha Khaled started the wait for her fiancé when she was 17. He was freed sixteen years later. An article titled "Loyalty of the Heroes" celebrated their marriage, laying bare patriarchal roles clearly: "men resist on the battlefield while women prepare the den of

heroes”<sup>14</sup>. Another case is that of Rawhi Mushtaha, who was imprisoned six months into his marriage. His wife chose to wait for him until freed, which took 24 years. Because she was too old to bear him children, he remarried. It was his first wife who chose him a second wife.<sup>15</sup> It is hard to understand Mushtaha’s story without taking into consideration the societal pressure a woman might be facing in a patriarchal society where the culture necessitates having children.

### **Gendered Experience in Israeli Prisons**

Patriarchy is a socio-political system that insists on males as “inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females”.<sup>16</sup> This also means that power is distributed less to women than men, who are raised at a young age to accept this distribution. In Palestine, these patriarchal norms become even clearer in prison. In the next few paragraphs, I examine three aspects that make Palestinian hunger strikes gendered.

The first of these aspects is about the perceptions and expectations of body politics in prisons. As argued earlier, hunger strikes by women are not only a challenge to the colonial authorities but also to the patriarchal norms that confine the roles of women to the house. Hence, prison-based resistance, including hunger strikes, is not about de-feminizing the body to make it less of a target for sexual abuse by prison guards or for societal abuse by a male-dominated system, but rather about making a political stance using the female body. Depicting women’s bodies as *fragile* and not masculine enough to embark on a hunger strike does not stop Palestinian women from embarking on such strikes and winning demands, including freedom. They challenge this notion and re-imagine their roles in society not only as mothers but as resistance fighters and insurgents. More interestingly, this picture of *fragile* women bodies often raises questions about the abuse of the colonial state or patriarchal power, which allows campaigners and activists to shift the attention from the female body to that of the violating body.<sup>17</sup>

The second aspect that makes women hunger strikes unique is the gendered

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Wadeh ‘The Loyalty of Heroes: A Palestinian story surprisingly awaited her 16-year-old fiancé’, 2019, [shorturl.at/afmAC](http://shorturl.at/afmAC).

<sup>15</sup> Women for Palestine ‘Ex-Prisoner Rawhi Mushtaha Having His First New-born Baby’, 2016, [shorturl.at/hjtG1](http://shorturl.at/hjtG1).

<sup>16</sup> bell hooks, ‘The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love’ (New York, Washington Square Press, 2004), p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Grisard Dominique Martine, ‘The Spectacle of the Hunger-Stricken Body: a German–Italian terrorist, Swiss prisons and the (ir)rational body politic’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 22, no. 1 (2015): 148, 150, 152.

differences seen in the way they share their experience of resistance, and hunger strikes more specifically. Women incarcerated for their activism share experiences similar to their male counterparts in prison but their ways of responding to the necropolitical matrix of power and the constraints of life within a prison cell differ radically from that of their male counterparts. Even as their struggle for freedom is publicly celebrated, women are reluctant to publicly discuss their experience in detention, given that they have been socialized to keep their lives in prison private. When reconstructing events, Palestinian women tend to look back at personal experiences and tell more intimate narratives, unlike men who tend to describe the general historical events. In her recent article, Lilach Rosenberg-Friedman shared a similar conclusion, arguing that unlike male prisoners who often wrote memoirs, females ‘typically kept their silence’. As such, oral documentation becomes key to documenting their experiences.

Despite this lack of scholarly work done on how women share their history of resistance, there is one common theme that emerge from my discussion with female prisoners which is how they insist on the national pride rather than the self when recollecting their past or present experiences of resistance. This tendency can be found beyond Palestine borders too. Algerian former political prisoner Jamila Bouhired, well known for her struggle against the French colonization of Algeria, is a prime example here as, in her words, the ‘national pride is more precious than the body. I did not do more than what I thought was my responsibility. I am still alive, unfortunately, it is the martyrs who ought to be celebrated’.<sup>18</sup> The ‘national’ in Bouhired quote goes further than the Algerian border to include other anti-colonial struggles that are of equal importance to ‘the national pride’. In 2017, she embarked on a solidarity hunger strike during the collective Palestinian strike. She was in her eighties, using the strike to raise awareness of the collective anti-colonial struggle. The theme of collective solidarity is continually offered as a reason to continue the fight and to refrain from serving only one’s self. Beyond the Arab world, and in a recent interview with former political prisoner Angela Davis, she also insisted on the importance of collective work, adding that the work she treasures the most is the one done collectively, rather than individually.<sup>19</sup> And while this pattern of valuing the collective over the individual self is a recurrent theme among women, this does not imply its non-existence among men, in contrast, there are several examples from Mahmoud Sarsak to Khader Adnan privileging the collective

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Mayadeen, ‘Honouring Djamila Bouhired’, 1993, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YThQ8W95qU0>.

<sup>19</sup> Angela Davis in conversation with Jude Kelly (June 28, 2020), <https://thewowfoundation.com/events/the-global-channel>.

national pride over the self, but it seems much more apparent in women case.

The third aspect of how hunger strikes by Palestinian female prisoners are unique is illuminated by comparing the gendered response of male and female prisoners when promised with release. During the Oslo peace process (1993-1999), Israel agreed to free several thousand prisoners of both genders. While women refused to leave until every single woman was free, many male prisoners left the prison without even saying goodbye to their fellow inmates.<sup>20</sup> As prisoner Rula Abu Dahi recalled:

The prison manager called us and said whoever heard her name announced must get her clothes for release at noon. All names were called except five. In response, Zahra Qurush [a prisoner] stood up and said, 'We will not leave. We all agreed that we will not leave except together.' The manager's facial expression changed. He was surprised and did not expect the situation.<sup>21</sup>

Mona Qa'dan relayed to me in an interview in 2020 the rest of the account as she heard from other prisoners,

All female prisoners rejected the deal until they were all freed. Etaf Elyan [more on her case below] was one of those to not be released. After several months of negotiations and promises, all women prisoners were to be freed. But as they were about to leave the prison, a new prisoner arrived in *al-boosta* (a transport machine used to transfer prisoners). In one voice, the women prisoners say we refuse to be freed until the new prisoner comes with us home. And this is exactly what happened.<sup>22</sup>

This is *sumud* in practice. *Sumud* or steadfastness is a socio-political ideology, revived in the 1980s by Palestinian leaders to promote a unified Palestinian narrative against the occupying Israeli force.<sup>23</sup> *Sumud* here is to choose the difficult route in order to achieve collective - as opposed to individual - justice, even if it means spending a longer term in prison. The action

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<sup>20</sup> Monqiz Abu Atwan, 'Institutionalization of the Imprisonment Life for Palestinian Prisons in Israeli Jails between 1967-2005', 2007, MA thesis, published – Birzeit University: Ramallah, Palestine, p. 144.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 20, p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> Qa'dan, Mona and Malaka Shwaikh, 'Interview with Mona Qa'dan', 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Emma Patricia Keelan and Brendan Ciarán Browne, 'Problematizing resilience: development practice and the case of Palestine, *Development in Practice*', *Development in Practice*, online copy, p. 8.

of collective solidarity described by Abu Dahi and Qa'dan above marked a significant achievement not only for the prisoners' movement but also for the Palestinian women anti-colonial struggle as a whole. By acting as a collective, not as individuals, these female prisoners made the defiance of patriarchal structures more viable.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, male prisoners who were freed during this same period left without waiting for all of their fellow inmates to be freed. It is important to ask why this was the case. The smaller number of women prisoners is not the reason behind this collective resistance, agreed by Mona Qa'dan (2020), who added that for most times, "unlike men, we hardly have a woman prisoner who even confess". The reality is women are naturally more caring. They build connections better and make stronger social cohesion. Intimacy and friendship seem to be more gendered here, and women are more collective in their action even when in larger numbers.

### **Women's Bodies as Sites of Subjection**

In the following section, I highlight the sexualized nature of abuse imposed on the bodies of Palestinian women prisoners as well as how the Israeli means of interrogation and torture intend to render those prisoners passive and their guards dominant. The form of power examined here draws inspiration from the work of Judith Butler who states that the (patriarchal) structure distributes 'identity' to male persons and a subordinate and relational 'negation' or 'lack' of it to women.<sup>25</sup> I will briefly examine the gendered dimension of prison experience, documenting accounts of solitary confinement, sexual harassment, and micro-aggression and its impacts on women in the prison context.

#### **1. Sexual Harassment**

'You're a pretty girl, you should be out having fun, why ruin your life?' One of them maintained that he was in love with me and wanted to marry me, if only I would confess. [...]. They beat me in front of my father and sisters and beat them in front of me. And they told my father that my activities were not political, but sexual, and showed him men whom they said I had slept with [...]. The thing is that the Israelis know how sensitive we

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<sup>24</sup> Samira Haj, 'Palestinian Women and Patriarchal Relations', *University of Chicago Press Journals* 17, no. 4 (1992): 777.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', (London: Routledge, 1990), 53.

are about these matters and they used the sexual aspect in order to frighten the girls and to make families refuse to let their daughters participate in the struggle.<sup>26</sup>

The above quote is by former Palestinian prisoner Rasma Odeh. It is a clear example of how Israeli prisons are spaces where women are invaded and violated systematically, using means that hurt the most in that societal context - sexual harassment. In Palestine, women have been made into national symbols, symbolizing not only the strength and unity of the nation but also its honor. Thus, Israeli threats are directed not only at women but also at an entire society, humiliating both men and women and demonstrating the men's inability to protect women. The fear of being sexually violated often comes up more clearly for women, even though men also go through it. Rape not only violates women and their bodies but also the nation as a whole and it is (actual or threatened) a fundamental part of the experience of Palestinian women in Israeli prisons.

Rape threats and sexual violence more broadly has been documented in Israeli prisons against women political prisoners as early as 1969. Given the shame it is associated with in the wider society, women often prefer to hide such stories of sexual harassment and assault at the hands of colonial authorities, making post-assault resources difficult to find and collect.<sup>27</sup> It continues to be a 'social taboo' that is hardly centered in discussion with women prisoners. Women who uncover sexual harassment on the hands of Israeli authorities might face a reactionary society and certain customs and traditions that would stigmatize or not tolerate them. Ex-political prisoner Khawla al-Azraq recalled that 'some women she knows, who had been raped in Israeli custody in the early 1970s, still struggle to talk about their experiences'.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes female prisoners feel shame even though they know that the Israeli authorities are their enemy and that this is a tactic used by these authorities to break them.<sup>29,30</sup>

One of the very few documented stories about rape in Israeli prisons was anonymized, given the shame it is associated with. The prisoner recalled: 'He [the Israeli police officer] was stronger than me. I tried to fight back but he raped me. I kept hitting him and did not stop

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<sup>26</sup> Soraya Antonius, 'Prisoners for Palestine: A list of Women Political Prisoners', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9, no. 3 (1980), p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> Addameer, 'Palestinian Women Political Prisoners', 2010, <https://www.addameer.org/sites/default/files/publications/palestinian-women-political-prisoners-december-2010.pdf>, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Chloé Benoist, 'Palestinian Women Haunted by Abuse in Israeli Jails', *Middle East Eye*, 02 February 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/palestinian-women-haunted-abuse-israeli-jails>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 28.

<sup>30</sup> Aminah Abu al-Kheir, 'The Worst Forms of Torture of Women in Israeli Prisons', *Alwatan*, 29 August 2018, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/content/print/1169189.html>.

screaming but no one heard me'. With help from a relative, she filed a complaint, but the file was closed a number of time because 'the offender is not known'.<sup>31</sup> Such attempts (some, like the above, successful) at rape and sexual harassment more broadly should be understood within the broader racial and gender-based colonial state violence. Addameer's research and that of Nahla Abdo show that the Israeli authorities capitalize on these patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes within the conservative Palestinian society.<sup>32</sup> Today, Palestinian women prisoners continue to be pressured and even forced to collaborate with the Israeli authorities, which uses all means of coercion from solitary confinement to sexual harassment.

## **2. Solitary confinement (and imprisonment more broadly)**

The IPS uses solitary confinement against women, as it does with men, to punish them. Even though both men and women experience solitary confinement and imprisonment, it has particular consequences for the latter. First, Sahar Francis work on Palestinians in Israeli prisons show that it can be detrimental to women's mental and physical well-being with impacts ranging from claustrophobia to anger and hallucinations. They may experience a mental collapse or confusion of identity while in confinement.<sup>33</sup> One example of this is the story of Nelli al-Safadi who was arrested at a military checkpoint between Nablus and Hebron on November 11, 2009, interrogated for forty-eight days, and prevented from seeing a lawyer or an International Committee of the Red Cross delegate. She was isolated for the whole period and was not allowed to go into the prison yard for sunlight. Sahar Francis (2017) interviewed al-Safadi and wrote about the impact of solitary confinement on her life, '[al-Safadi] eventually lost her sense of time and could no longer distinguish between day and night', '[she] lost control and broke down as a result of her extended isolation', 'screamed and banged on the door', and then 'fainted'.<sup>34</sup> Similar to al-Safadi's case, Shireen Issawi, a human rights lawyer, was also put in solitary confinement. She was arrested five times, the latest of which was in March 2014 for forty-three months. She was mistreated, tortured, and spent most of her time while incarcerated in solitary confinement. She was only freed in 2017. Her experience of solitary confinement was so daunting that she embarked on several hunger strikes to reclaim agency over her life and body. The latest of her strikes was in 2005 for at least a week, to demand an end date for her solitary confinement, allow her family to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid 30.

<sup>32</sup> Nahla Abdo, 'Palestinian munadelat: Between western representation and lived reality', in *Thinking Palestine*, (London: Zed Books, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 8, p. 53.

visit her and provide basic needs.<sup>35</sup> But this ‘faster’ consequences of solitary confinement and imprisonment, as a whole, on women is not necessarily the case all the times. Interviews conducted for this article shows that women prisoners like Mona Qa’dan became a symbol of steadfastness in prisons while male prisoners next door collapsed from the first day and started confessing. When asked if solitary confinement breaks women faster in prisons, she told me (2020),

In contrast, from my experience, solitary confinement only increased my moral. In 2011, I was put in solitary confinement in Hasharon, away from where women political prisoners are in Damon. They tried to break me and put me between security prisoners. It only strengthened me. It might come faster to some prisoners – it really depends on the prisoners.

It is possible the patriarchal norms play a role here as men narrative sticks to their ‘robust and masculine’ body that shall not fall easily and even if they do, this shall stay a private matter, unlike the ‘fragile’ women body that collapses faster and easier. I agree with Qa’dan on that the impact of solitary confinement depends on the person rather than their gender. In a patriarchal structure where it is rare for a woman to live on her own before marriage, especially in the most conservative parts such as Hebron and Gaza, while it is more common for men to do so, the experience of imprisonment itself will be unique and unprecedented for many women, who might sleep outside their household for the first time ever. Sleeping outside their house is societally challenging: when Palestinian prisoner Khader Adnan embarked on a hunger strike, his wife and children went to the Israeli hospital where he was held to demand his release. In the next hour, Palestinians in social media started making calls to join Adnan’s wife and children, one of those calls was to ‘not let the wife sleep in the street’. A deal between Adnan and the Israeli authorities was agreed in the same night for the former’s release.

Second, women in solitary confinement are under surveillance by male and female warders, resulting in micro-aggression and harassment whether by the discomfort caused by watching them in their private spaces or when they are searched. Within the prison space, there are clear cameras in *al-foora* space (small yards used by prisoners for walks during break time), interrogation centres, and solitary confinement cells. IPS officers, male and

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<sup>35</sup> Hashim Hamdan, ‘Medhat and Shiren Issawi Suspended their Hunger Strikes’, *Arab48*, 20 June 2015, <https://bit.ly/2NTjwQP>.

female, come to inspect women's prisoners' rooms too. The constant supervision of women's spaces, times, and bodies can exacerbate the feeling of loss of privacy. This experience is shared by women in other prison contexts too, for example, American ex-political prisoner Laura Whiteman recalled, 'For women, [prison officers] use the vulnerability of being watched without knowing, having all your bodily functions spied on [...] In the federal system, male guards are not allowed to stand and watch you take shower. But you are subjected to pat downs from male guards, and this makes you so vulnerable'.<sup>36</sup> In a recent visit to Women's Jail in Johannesburg (April 2019) which was used during the Apartheid era and is turned to a museum today, the tour guide made it clear that women and their bodies were mistreated by the colonial authorities, and surveillance was a key there.

Third, women are more likely to be the primary guardians of children when imprisoned, which puts the women at a greater risk of depression and anxiety. That is in addition to their children being forced to watch their mothers assaulted and detained, often in the middle of the night. Qahira as-Saadi, a mother and former political prisoner, described her experience as 'horrific': 'I was beaten, dragged on the floor and pulled by my hair'. Her child Mohammed for his part said, 'we did not know they were going to take her away. If we knew, we would have talked to her, kissed her, spent time with her, but they just took her'. Even worse, as soon as she was sent to the interrogation centre, she was told her 10 and 16-year old daughters had been arrested and 'would be raped unless [she] complied with the prison authorities' demands',<sup>37</sup> yet another example of capitalizing on rape to push female prisoners to comply. These restrictions are unique to women in different ways. They are used in a gendered way to punish them, not allowing them sanitary products or threatening with rape are just examples. Those usual restrictions tend to hurt women more because many are mothers who will have restrictions on visits. The Israeli authorities capitalize on motherhood and used the prisoners' daughters to force them to confess. The case of Issam Abdel-Hadi from March 1969 is seminal here. In the interrogation room,

There were four men [...]. The huge blond went out and returned with my daughter. He grabbed her by her clothes, lifted her like a feather and sat her on the table. [...] "We'll throw your daughter to the soldiers. Do you call yourself a mother? You don't deserve this title." And things of that sort. I said, "If you believe that I am guilty, you

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid 6, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Addameer, 'Palestinian Women Political Prisoners', 2010, <https://www.addameer.org/sites/default/files/publications/palestinian-women-political-prisoners-december-2010.pdf>, p. 12.

must punish me, not my daughter. I'm ready for any punishment." And I took off my scarf and coat. He began to beat my daughter with the thin, flat whip; she made no sound. Then he switched to the thick one and she began to cry. And he said, using filthy words that I prefer not to repeat, "First we'll beat her, then we'll give her to the soldiers..." The big man now began beating my child with the steel-tipped whip and the blood came on her arms and legs - they never beat her on the face - because her skin was bruised from the day before. He went on using filthy, disgusting words and saying they would turn her into a prostitute. She had said nothing until then, but when he used the third whip she cried out: "Wubusb" (beasts). My blood was boiling, I can't tell you what I felt.<sup>38</sup>

## **Female Bodies as Sites of Resistance**

In this section, I present three accounts of Palestinian women prisoners. Specifically, I look at the ways they exercise their resistance to Israeli torture and intimidation by refusing to collaborate and instead turning their bodies into sites of resistance - a harder and riskier path - to achieve their demands.

### **1. Itaf Elyan**

Itaf was first arrested in August 1987. This was followed by three other arrests. In total, she spent 14 years in Israeli prisons. Her experience is exceptional in various ways, not only for being the first female individual hunger striker since 1967, almost eighteen years after the first documented hunger strike by a male prisoner (Awni al-Sheikh) in 1969, but also for her extraordinary *sumud*, in that she stood resilient in the face of beating and racial and religious abuse, none of which broke her resolve. She embarked on twenty documented hunger strikes, individually and collectively, between 1987 and 2006, probably the largest number of individual strikes among all Palestinian prisoners. Her gender was not a barrier in any of this but rather a means to stress her ability to weaponize her feminine body and win demands.

Recollecting her experience of forty-day interrogation in 1987, she said, 'Israeli interrogators racially abused me and mocked my religious beliefs [...]'. Religious symbols are often used by Israeli soldiers to intimidate women prisoners. Sahar Francis of Addameer organization said that women would often get into heated debates with Israeli soldiers to let

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid 4, pp. 40-41.

them wear it before being taken from their homes.<sup>39</sup> And this is what instigated Elyan's first 12-day hunger strike, as the Israeli interrogators tried to pull off her religious headscarf and rip off her dress. Unusually, Elyan also stopped speaking throughout her strike. Her double withdrawal from food and speech added another level of *sumud* to her resistance and a new layer to her sacrifice. As Banu Bargu suggests, double-withdrawal hunger striking 'stand[s] in tension with the conventional mobilities of political action understood within a rationalist, discursive and instrumentalist framework'.<sup>40</sup> In reflecting on the basis for her strike, Elyan laid claim to the rights accorded by international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention, which stipulates that 'internees shall enjoy complete latitude in the exercise of their religious duties' (Article 93).

Attempts by the interrogators to end Elyan's strike were unsuccessful until they vowed not to touch her headscarf again. As she ended her first strike, she was subjected to harsh treatment in all prisons to which she was transferred. As a result, she declared a second hunger strike through which she demanded to be returned to Ramleh prison, where political prisoners were held - a demand she later achieved. It is worth noting that at the time, in the 1980s, both Israeli and Palestinian prisoners were held in the same prisons, sometimes in the same prison cells, where 'criminal Israeli prisoners' attack 'Palestinian political prisoners'. Also note that Palestinians held in Israeli prisons consider themselves "political" while the Israeli authorities consider them "security" prisoners. For the prisoners, it is important to frame their struggle as political and anti-colonial because, this takes into consideration the root causes of hunger strikes and encourages wider sympathy with them. In the words of Walid Dakka (2006):

What are we dealing with here? With a definition? Can this or that definition do anything to add or detract from the prisoners' conditions of confinement, or to release those we seek to release? The answer is: Yes! The definition we are demanding is a political definition and not a legal one, and it is not only a

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<sup>39</sup> Chloé Benoist, 'Palestinian Women Haunted by Abuse in Israeli Jails', *Middle East Eye*, 02 February 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/palestinian-women-haunted-abuse-israeli-jails>.

<sup>40</sup> Although withdrawing from food and speech is already a double withdrawal, at the beginning of the 21st century, prisoners, refugees, and asylum seekers embarked on a further level of self-directed violence with lip, ear, and even eyelid sewing, covered in detail by Banu Bargu, 'The Silent Exception: Hunger Striking and Lip Sewing', *Law, Culture and Humanities Journal*, 2017, p. 10.

theoretical position of principle that derives from it, but also a politically practical one.<sup>41</sup>

Elyan's next hunger strike, in 1992, lasted 34 days. She demanded an end to her solitary confinement. During this time, the prison administration pressured her to break her strike but to no avail, until the administration surrendered to her demands and returned her to Ramleh prison, where prisoners are known to be pioneers in the use of 'open hunger strikes to escalate prisoners' resistance'.<sup>42</sup> Less than a week later, Elyan joined a collective hunger strike for eleven days, calling for wider-ranging demands, including but not limited to improving prison conditions for all prisoners. Elyan was then freed under the Oslo Peace Process which freed all Palestinian women prisoners in 1997. Later in the same year, she was re-imprisoned under an administrative detention ruling, without a charge or a trial. On October 22, 1997, three days after she was imprisoned, she embarked on a hunger strike, this time for forty-five days, her longest. She protested 'her detention in the first place and her administrative detention in the second place'. Two months later, she was freed.

Elyan's fourth major individual hunger strike (for forty days) in 1998 was different, especially with regard to the additional patriarchal pressure from inside and outside the prisons to stop her strike. Israeli pressure on Palestinian officials and her family intensified. Authorities even brought Elyan's former fiancé to visit her and try to persuade her to stop the strike. To him, she said: 'My love will turn into hate [towards] anyone trying to influence my hunger strike and I do not want it to be coming from you'.<sup>43</sup> Elyan here not only resisted compliance with Israeli interrogators but she also rejected patriarchal societal pressure. She practiced *sumud* and refused all negotiations for the end to her administrative detention in return for an end to her strike until a written agreement, which stipulated that she would be treated in the prison clinic and then released, was signed in the presence of the Minister of Prisoners of the Palestinian Authority. When her release was delayed for three days, she declared the strike again, and was then freed.

In 2003, and for her continuous work in al-Naqaa Charitable Society which opened a surgical center to care for the wounded of the al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005), Elyan was re-arrested. She described her interrogation period as 'very simple',<sup>44</sup> which indicates that she

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<sup>41</sup> Abeer Baker, 'The Definition of Palestinian Prisoners in Israeli Prisons as 'Security Prisoners'', *Security Semantics for Camouflaging Political Practice*, Review 5, p. 65.

<sup>42</sup> Addameer, 'Ramleh Prison and Clinic', n.d. <http://www.addameer.org/prisons/ramleh-prison-clinic>.

<sup>43</sup> Aziza Nofal, 'Itaf Elyan', 18 April 2017, <https://ultrapal.ultrasawt.com/المحررة-عطاف-عليان-والفدائي-الذي-قتلها-عشقا/عزيرة-نوفال-ذاكرة-وطنية>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid 34.

had become experienced in dealing with the process. She was not transferred to Ramleh's Neve Tirza prison, where women prisoners are held, until she completed a three-day hunger strike. Nine months later Elyan was freed; she married the former prisoner Walid al-Hodali in what could be seen as a dedication of the rest of her life to resistance to the occupation.

On December 22, 2005, Elyan, who by then had a one-year old daughter, Aisha, was re-arrested in her house in Ramallah, and sentenced for six months, later reduced to four months under the administrative detention rule. Only her child was allowed to visit her in prison, but she was forced to talk to her mother through a phone and to see her from behind a glass barrier. Elyan demanded to embrace her child during the visit, a request rejected by the prison's administration.<sup>45</sup> Being familiar with international conventions and human rights treaties, she asserted her rights as a mother in terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention.<sup>46</sup> This extended to the right to see and hug her daughter until she was two years old. Elyan negotiated this right with the Israeli authorities and noted that the Israeli authorities do not grant such rights easily. At the end, in February 20, 2006, Elyan submitted a complaint and embarked on a 16-day hunger strike, demanding reunion with her daughter. The authorities continued to refuse her demands. Aware of her tenacity, the prison authorities negotiated with her and she was allowed to stay with her daughter in the detention center within a few days after the strike ended.

Elyan's detention was not easy. She was placed in solitary confinement. The mere idea of expressing or having *strong* political views can put prisoners in solitary confinement to psychologically torture them, as ex-prisoner and hunger striker Shireen Issawi relayed to me in an interview.<sup>47</sup> In the prison's solitary cell, very little is provided beyond food, water, and a coarse blanket. This signifies separation and loneliness: no visitors are permitted, letters are neither sent nor received, and the only interaction permitted is with a small number of Israeli jailers who do not speak Arabic. Elyan's resistance in these dark and violent spaces not only challenges the colonial rules and societal norms but also re-defines those deeply entrenched roles and re-imagines a more just society where women are treated equally.

## 2. Mona Qa'dan

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<sup>45</sup> Elyan, Itaf and Malaka Shwaikh, 'Interview with Itaf Elyan', 2017.

<sup>46</sup> The Fourth Geneva Convention, 'Articles 14, 16, 23, 38, 50, 89, 132, and 138', [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33\\_GC-IV-EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Issawi, Shireen and Malaka Shwaikh, 'Interview with Shireen Issawi', 2018.

[In Israeli prisons], we have Palestinian women prisoners who truly stay steadfast more than their male counterparts. I know of women who entered the interrogation rooms then left and refused to even say their names. One time, in 1999, I was interrogated in Israeli prisons. There were a few other male prisoners around confessing. One man arrived and did not want to confess, and the Israeli interrogator responded with, ‘Do you think you are Mona Qa’dan to not confess?’ In my last imprisonment, the IPS said they do not want to interrogate me. They deliberately avoid interrogating me.

These are the words of Mona Qa’dan, whose steadfastness meant that Israeli authorities just skipped her interrogation. On February 12, 1999, Mona was first imprisoned. She then embarked on a hunger strike. She lost half of her weight as a result but that was not a barrier to continuously weaponize her life and win demands. Qa’dan was clearly inspired by Elyan’s first strike, ‘I met Etaf in 1997. We are good friends. She told me about her hunger strike, and it is her who inspired me to embark on mine in 1999. My *sumud* was derived from her. I have three brothers who experienced Israeli prisons but Etaf inspired me the most’, she relayed to me in an interview (2020). Both prisoners are from cities of the West Bank, Jenin and from Bethlehem (currently Ramallah) respectively, and members of the same political party, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Qa’dan’s 37-day hunger strike took place while she was interrogated, the hardest and the most violent part of the prison experience, ‘In 1999, the interrogation was military, involving physical torture, before the IPS turned to use psychological torture’ (2020). In the interrogation rooms, she was subjected to physical torture such as beating and *the ghost* (sitting in a chair, handcuffed with feet shackled). She demanded her release which she later achieved.

Five years later (2004), she was re-arrested and was subjected to various forms of psychological torture. She was released after 28 days of interrogation. Women broke their hunger strikes last in this collective action (after male strikers did), an example used by Qa’dan to show how women are more ‘capable of exemplifying *sumud* than their male counterparts. In this same year, she joined a collective hunger strike, with a group of prisoners, who demanded that the prison authorities allow family visits. Again, in 2007, she was re-imprisoned for 21 days before yet another major imprisonment in 2011. In the latter, she was interrogated for sixty-two days then taken from interrogation to solitary confinement. She was separated from the other ‘political prisoners’ and put among ‘criminal prisoners’, a tactic used to torture Palestinian prisoners who are often ‘verbally abused’ by the former (2020). She embarked on a hunger strike for 18 days and later achieved a transfer to where

political prisoners are held in Damon. Her most recent hunger strike was individual, in 2013 for 18 days. In 2013, in solidarity with her brother Tariq, imprisoned in the same jails.

Like Elyan, Qa'dan stayed steadfast despite the extensive pressure from the Israeli interrogators. Refusing to collaborate here is a tangible act of *sumud* in which the rejection is not only of the subjection by Israeli jailers but also the whole system. Death is a viable option here, constantly imagined while the prisoner is being interrogated. But disclosing sensitive details to the Israeli authorities is worse than death for many Palestinians. Hence, they often prefer death over collaborating. Prisoners like Elyan and Qa'dan were kept in narrow cells and were deprived of sleep and basic needs. When interrogated, they were offered an end to 'their suffering' providing a confession is made. In the case of those two prisoners however, *sumud* was always their response. They continued to bear multiple levels of suffering to protect their communities and, what they chose to define as, Palestinian resistance.

Elyan and Qa'dan were the only documented individual hunger strikers from 1970 until 2004. They refused to feed their bodies on multiple occasions, turning them into sites of resistance in a tangible act of *necroresistance* and *declaring through these acts* a preference for the risk of self-sacrifice to that of continuous incarceration. In several ways, Elyan's and Qa'dan's experience against Israeli harassment is unique - not only are they the first individual female hunger strikers, but their commitment and unwavering *sumud* in the face of racial and religious abuse never broke their resolve. In interviews, both Elyan and Qa'dan insisted on their rights and duties as political prisoners in Israeli jails, "those who knows their rights are more able to stay steadfast," in Qa'dan words (2020). In declaring their strikes, they embodied their demand for a better life in the most constrained and unfavorable of conditions and times, reclaiming ownership of their life and actions, disposing of attempts by both the Israeli authorities and, for Elyan, the patriarchal nature of the society, to stop their actions. Their acts conveyed their prioritization of their dignity and political goals over life itself.

### **3. Hana Shalabi**

Elyan and Qa'dan pioneered paths for other prisoners, male and female, to embark on individual hunger strikes as a means of last resort. On February 16, 2012, Hana Shalabi was imprisoned under an administrative detention rule. From the moment she was taken from her home, Shalabi was subjected to a humiliating and hostile treatment. She was also strip-searched in a violent way, a process by which all, or almost all, of a prisoners clothing is forcibly removed, including their undergarments. This type of strip search is not unique to women prisoners, and what makes it gendered is the knowledge that is more humiliating for

women prisoners than for men. During this process, they are often asked to squat while naked, and are frequently subjected to ‘intrusive internal body searches’. Failing to comply means being sent to solitary confinement.<sup>48</sup> According to Sana’a al-Hafi, the process may take hours; ‘my ordeal [...] started at about 7:30 in the morning. Soldiers searched me in such a humiliating way. They probed every part of my body. They forced me to undress completely. I stayed in that condition until midnight’.<sup>49</sup> This process not only harms the prisoner but her family and society, as Shalabi elaborates:

It is very difficult for prisoners to be strip searched. The soldiers make the prisoners undress in front of them. It is difficult for a patriotic Palestinian prisoner to take off his clothes in front of Israeli soldiers. They want to humiliate us, subjugate us. But when they saw us lifting our heads with pride they made other prisoners undress in front of us. I gave them a hard time. I could not accept being strip searched. In front of six soldiers, a nurse and a female soldier. The female soldier let them do it. I tried to fight back but I was cuffed. My body was covered with scratches from the soldiers’ nails. One soldier beat me. He took off all my clothes by force in front of seven soldiers. This was when I decided to go on a hunger strike before I was sentenced to six months administrative detention.<sup>50, 51</sup>

The stripping of bodies functions not only as a means of controlling prisoners’ bodies and sexuality but also their politics and societal reputation. In a conservative society such as Palestine in which women’s bodies are regarded as particularly sacrosanct, the stripping of bodies becomes a prime tactic of controlling and threatening prisoners and their families. It is therefore, not only the occupation that needs to be resisted here but the society. As ex-prisoner Ahed Tamimi said, the Palestinian society needs to ‘unify the national struggle and social liberation movement’ so that the Palestinians ‘do not just free’ themselves from ‘the occupation’, but rather become free also within their own society. Tamimi added that ‘[we]

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<sup>48</sup> Addameer, ‘Palestinian Women Political Prisoners’, 2010, <https://www.addameer.org/sites/default/files/publications/palestinian-women-political-prisoners-december-2010.pdf>, p. 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ramzy Baroud, ‘Prisoners Are Heroes’, *Day of Palestine*, 08 April 2019, <https://dayofpalestine.com/post/11924/‘prisoners-are-heroes’-being-a-palestinian-prisoner-in-israel>.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Jazeera Documentary, ‘Hunger Strike’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u49jwfcLwuE>, 2014, 12-14 min.

<sup>51</sup> Administrative detention is a British Mandate-old imprisonment tactic used to put Palestinians in Israeli prisons without a charge or a trial.

have to fight for a society that has equality and justice between men and women between old and young [...] The national activism should be aligned with social activism'.<sup>52</sup>

To protest her administrative detention and mistreatment, Shalabi embarked on a hunger strike on the first day of her arrest (B'Tselem 2012).<sup>53</sup> She was then put in solitary confinement. She lost sense of time and could no longer distinguish between day and night. She even started talking to herself. As noted earlier, solitary confinement of women prisoners is a frequent occurrence within Israeli prisons and is designed primarily to separate specific prisoners from the prisoners' community. Shalabi stood steadfast and did not comply or give a confession despite her difficult solitary confinement period. In other words, she practiced *sumud*, and kept asking for her release, a demand she achieved forty-three days into her hunger strike. She accepted, under an agreement with the Israeli authorities, to be deported temporarily (for three years) to the Gaza Strip in March 2012, away from the rest of her family in Jenin, a city in the West Bank. As she arrived in the Strip, she stated, 'I am very happy to be in my country with my people'.<sup>54</sup> Little did she know then that this would not be a temporary exile, and that the Israeli authorities would not allow her back to the West Bank. At time of writing this article (April 2020), Shalabi is still stuck in Gaza. She made several pleas to be allowed a return but to no avail.<sup>55</sup> This shows that such agreements with Israeli authorities are not trust-worthy as far as political prisoners are concerned, demonstrating Israel's noncommitment and impunity.

### **For a More Critical Approach to *Sumud*/Resilience within Prisons**

"The world gets used to us sticking to *sumud*. They expect us all to stick to *sumud*, all the times".<sup>56</sup>

Hunger strikers like Shalabi, Elyan and Qa'dan accept the possibility of death as preferable to that of continuous incarcerations. Their stories show clearly how women hunger strikers use their subjugated bodies to reassert control over their own beings. They also show how women

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<sup>52</sup> Dina Takruri, 'Interview with Ahed Tamimi', 9 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/32t9J7w>, min 5-6).

<sup>53</sup> B'Tselem, 'Hana Shalabi on 40 days hunger strike', 26 March 2012, [https://www.btselem.org/arabic/administrative\\_detention/hana\\_shalabi](https://www.btselem.org/arabic/administrative_detention/hana_shalabi).

<sup>54</sup> Shalabi, Hana and Malaka Shwaikh, 'Interview with Hana Shalabi', 2017. Caitlin Ryan, *Bodies, Power and Resistance in the Middle East: Experiences of Subjectification in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 117-118.

<sup>55</sup> Shalabi, Hana and Malaka Shwaikh, 'Interview with Hana Shalabi', 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Qa'dan, Mona and Malaka Shwaikh, 'Interview with Mona Qa'dan', 2020.

learn to resist control of their lives by weaponizing these same lives; in doing so, they turn their bodies from sites of subjection into sites of resistance. Although there are very few means with which to resist, and the rigid political structure limits opportunities to challenge prison authorities, hunger striking offers a path to agency. Refusing to eat means rejecting objectification by prison authorities, jailers, and the broader circumstances of occupation. In the case of some Palestinian women prisoners such as Elyan, theirs is a dual struggle: the female body is not just a potential weapon against the occupation, but also against the patriarchal norms of Palestine itself, which frame women as “weak” and “pure” and relegate them to the reproductive sphere. Hunger striking can thus be an assertion of individual and collective feminine power to resist colonial and patriarchal injustices.

Female prisoners practice *sumud* to describe the way they resist Israeli colonial policies. At its core, *sumud* as a concept promotes narratives of Palestinian solidarity and perseverance. Importantly, it goes further to embody resistance, articulating the need for retaining a strong connection to Palestinian lands and the refusal to be separated from it.<sup>57</sup> There is a merit in appreciating the word’s origin and power, however, there are pitfalls to it. The rise in popularity of the term in recent years in scholarly work has led some to accuse it of having become more of a fashion than a resistance strategy. Such fetishization has been regularly criticized by Palestinians. Abulhawa, for example, writes that *sumud* portrays “unfathomable Palestinian heroism, courage”, “in mythical terms”, and that it has been “romanticized” to convey epic steadfastness, as if Palestinians “can endure anything”.<sup>58</sup> Abulhawa’s criticism is in line with how I perceive the use of *sumud* and other concepts with similar meanings, including resilience. In a different context, human rights lawyer Tricie Washington’s response to policymakers who commended the resilience of the New Orleans community following Hurricane Katrina reads as follows,

Stop calling me  
Resilient.  
Because every time you say  
“Oh, they are resilient,”  
that means you can do something else to me.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid 23, p. 8. Mohammed Marie, Ben Hannigan and Aled Jones, ‘Resilience of Nurses Who Work in Community Mental Health Workplaces in Palestine’, *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 26, no. 4, (2017): 344–354.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Abulhawa, ‘How the left also dehumanizes Palestinians in Gaza’, *Aljazeera*, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/left-dehumanises-palestinians-gaza-190412082348119.html>.

I am not resilient.<sup>59</sup>

The potential of resilience and sumud to become a tool of further oppression needs to be examined more critically. These ‘coping’ strategies are often utilised in rigid quantitative research frameworks,<sup>60</sup> and this needs to be challenged. Would one perceive Shalabi the same way if she confessed and complied with the IPS orders? What if she did not ‘cope’ with prison torture or could not endure her solitary confinement? We should not expect women at risk to be resilient. We should not expect women to bear colonial and patriarchal state violence and stay *resilient*. *Rather, we should change the conditions that force them to have to be resilient*. We should expect them to decide for themselves what works best for them. And if they choose to not exercise sumud, this should not be painted as a disadvantage or quantified as a weakness. They know better what their conditions and limits are.

We need a more critical language that recognizes the reality of asymmetrical power relations, its colonial nature and structural racism, the gender violence inherent in it, and which centres Palestinian voice, especially women’s, and the language they deem right, is very much needed. This does not mean aligning discourses to western liberal interpretations that either dehumanize the prisoners or romanticizes their stories in mythical terms as if they were capable of bearing all forms of violence without fear or break down. Such discourses are, if anything, a depoliticization of the Palestinian struggle for justice. The Palestinians shall not be constantly asked or expected to develop strategies of ‘coping’ to be *successful* enough in resistance, in the western rigid lens. What matters more is to seek proactive ways that *really* address the underlying disastrous effects of the occupation, the root cause of all problems in Palestine and the reasons Palestinians resist in the first place.

Finally, and while earlier discussions around sumud is important, we need to recognize that prisons in their totality are violent spaces that only perpetuate harm, violence, and hatred. Prison abolition needs to cover colonial prisons too for that caging human beings is an act of violent, wherever it takes place. Abolition in a country which, in Angela Davis words, have “the worst possible example of a carceral society”,<sup>61</sup> is a moral stance to *really* build a just society. We need to re-imagine the world without prisons and re-thinking incarceration that we take for granted to ‘protect’ and ‘save’ us. We need to challenge and re-

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<sup>59</sup> Cited in Jessica Blythe et al ‘The Dark Side of The Dark Side of Transformation: Latent Risks in Contemporary Sustainability Discourse’, *A Radical Journal of Geography*: Antipode Foundation Ltd 50, no. 5 (2018), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 23.

<sup>61</sup> Haymarket Books Twitter Account (June 7 2020) available at: <https://twitter.com/haymarketbooks/status/1269586591053303808>.

think the capitalist and colonial systems that fund prisons and devalue Black, Brown, and Indigenous lives, posing more questions about white and settler privileges and the subsequent racial (in)justices. We need to challenge the state's claim that prisons shall be the first resorts to almost all problems from poverty, to drugs, and political dissent. These are necessary questions to get to the root causes of the real problem: why are Palestinians stopped and questioned by the Israeli authorities in Palestinian territories, handcuffed when they do not even resist, extrajudicially killed in checkpoints between and within Palestinian cities, and got imprisoned for long periods for 'political charges'? Today, it is time to break with the past and imagine our world a new. Moving beyond global prisons will require collective alternatives that re-think punishment and challenge its existence as the sole way to achieve collective justice.