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Unruly Boys and Obedient Girls: Gender and Education in UNRWA Schools in the West Bank

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Almost 70 years after the Palestinian displacement, many Palestinian refugee youth in the Middle East are still in schools run by a UN agency, the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). As other educational systems, UNRWA schools are not gender neutral. In the West Bank refugee camps where this study was conducted, girls were often more engaged in their schooling and achieved better than boys. Building on qualitative interviews and observations in schools and in families, this article investigates such gendered engagements in school. The main argument is that different cultural expectations on boys and girls and different imaginations of their futures (which are related to the present economic and political context) make boys and girls engage differently in their schooling. Because of a dire economic situation, women's wage labor is increasingly valued and therefore also higher education for women. At the same time, the crisis adds to ambivalences to male youth who traditionally has been actively engaged in resistance activities. With policy changes in UNRWA that aims to keep politics out of school, boys find school increasingly pointless. Their local social networks are, on the other hand, very valuable as to get employed. Despite the stalemate in the occupied territories, Palestinian gender relations are changing.

Keywords:

Palestinian refugees; gender; education; West Bank; resistance; social mobility; wage labor

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses how understandings of gender, in combination with a particular local political and economic context, influence the engagement of Palestinian refugee girls and boys in their schooling. It builds primarily on an ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 2012 among ninth graders in schools run by UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank. In UNRWA schools, gender is significant in several ways. First of all, schools are gender-segregated; both students and teachers work almost exclusively with people of their own sex. In addition, although literacy rates for both men and women are high, boys' academic achievements are in general lower than those of girls of the same age.¹ The dropout rates among males are higher than among females in general in Palestinian schools.² Young women attend higher education in increasing numbers and now outnumber male students (PCBS 2015, 31).³ Female Palestinian refugees, thus, seem more engaged in and committed to their education than their male counterparts. Such gendered trends within education are not unique to the Palestinian case (see for example Fuller 2016; Mjaaland 2016). However, in the occupied Palestinian territories such development is perhaps more surprising than in other contexts since so much societal emphasis is put on education. Getting educated, as I show in this article, is often seen as a patriotic duty, especially among Palestinian camp refugees.

In this article, I discuss how different gendered

1 For instance, the test scores in all subjects in the high-school final exam (*tawjihi*) show that 78 percent of the girls pass while only 68 percent of the boys who take the exam pass (Brück et al. 2014, 9). In the same exam, girls' average test score is 672, while boys' average is 602 (Ibid.). The authors' calculations are based on the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education's (MoEHE) data. Average test score is the average total test score at the final exam. Pass is the share of students that passes the exam. A student passes the exam if he or she gets at least 50 percent of the subject's maximum grade in all the subjects (i.e., 500) (Ibid.).

2 During the basic stage, the dropout rate is 0.6 for females and 1.3 for males. During the second stage it is 3.3 for females and 4.2 for males (PCBS 2015, 26) and so also in UNRWA schools (UNRWA Education department 2015, 13). According to UNRWA's own report the drop-out rates have declined during the period 2011–2015 after the implementation of educational reform. Overall, the rates still remain lower for girls (UNRWA Education department 2015).

3 According to PCBS (2015), the gender parity index is in favor of Palestinian females: 1.56 in the 2014/2015 academic year compared to 0.88 in the 2000/2001 academic year.

engagements in school are related to dynamic notions and ideals of boyhood and girlhood, as well as of masculinity and femininity more generally, and also to the present economic and political stalemate in the Palestinian territories. My main argument is that different cultural expectations on boys and girls and different imaginations of their futures (which are related to the present economic and political context) make boys and girls engage differently in their schooling. These expectations and imaginations are also connected to the youth's engagement in places other than school, namely in their homes and in the local neighborhood. Moreover, I show that social change is produced both by a dire economic situation with high unemployment and a change of policy within UNRWA schools that aims to keep politics out of refugee schooling. This tends to create ambivalence towards the role of male youth in their communities but also new opportunities for females. Palestinian boyhood has long held connotations of male bravery and political resistance to Israeli occupation. As I will explain further, as UNRWA education becomes de-politicized, many boys also find school less interesting. Girls, on the other hand, are eager to do well in school and to continue to higher education as it is a means for social mobility for them more than for boys. Women's wage labor is increasingly needed and valued in Palestinian society, but females have rather few options since especially many manual jobs are not considered appropriate for women. I will first contextualize my findings by describing UNRWA schooling and its relation to Palestinian refugees. Then, I go on to explain the methodological considerations I followed during my fieldwork and give a brief overview of what has been written on gender and Palestinian refugee youth. Thereafter I present my findings in four different sections: naturalization of gender behavior; youth's engagement in different places; imagining a future as professional women, and taming Palestinian refugee boys through UN schooling. Finally, I provide a short conclusion to summarize and clarify my arguments.

PALESTINIAN CAMP REFUGEES AND UN SCHOOLING

Education is very important for all Palestinians, and especially for refugees. Economically we are poor, we don't have [other] resources. We don't have any land to work on and no businesses. Without work, we can't feed our families. Both in a psychological and social way people have lost a lot, but education gives back self-confidence. Before, refugees had very low status [...]. Today, there are refugees both in the Palestinian parliament and in the government. The mufti [a Muslim religious leader] in Bethlehem is a refugee. The [Palestinian] minister of education is a refugee. (Abu Layth, male teacher in a boys' school)

Almost seventy years after UNRWA's founding, the agency continues to embody a unique international commitment dedicated to the welfare of Palestinian refugees who fled or are the descendants of those about 750 000 Palestinians displaced during the first Israeli-Arab war in 1948 (Pappe 2004, 139). Most Palestinian refugees stayed in the Middle East; the greater part of them fled to Gaza and the West Bank, to Lebanon, Syria and Jordan but some also to Egypt. Impoverished peasants eventually gathered in refugee camps. The poverty that marked those places was related to the loss of livelihood and land; people could no longer farm or sell some land to get cash, neither did they have professions or education (Ibid, 47).

UNRWA has continued to provide education, health care, relief and social services, micro-credit loans and emergency aid to some five million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. In the case of schooling, UNRWA has come to transmit much more than relief; new educational institutions, curriculum and practices challenged traditional forms of knowledge and an aged and gendered authority structure (Peteet 2005, 92). UN schooling differed markedly from the religious village-schools where previous generations of men had learnt how to read and write. In the camps, everyone, including girls, gained access to secular education.

The attraction of education should not be underestimated. Refugees saw education as a mobile and symbolic form of capital (Ibid, 109) and accomplishing higher education has for many refugees been a family project and an avenue to upward social mobility (Rosenfeld 2004). Palestinians in general emphasize the importance of education and are proud of academic success. Regionally, they have also been well-known for their high levels of literacy and education; UNRWA education has been the envy of, for instance, the Lebanese since their government schools were of lower quality than those of the UN. Education also facilitated the employment of Palestinians in the Gulf economies in the 1960s and 1970s (Peteet 2005, 64).

For generations of Palestinians born in camps, schooling also expanded the range of social interactions well beyond social networks based on village origins and kin relations. Nutritional and hygienic interventions such as supplemental feeding and mass immunizations have been and still are an integral part of daily routines in UNRWA schools (Ibid. 84f; own observations). Peteet (2005) writes about UNRWA intervention as a project of modernization connected to a refashioning of identities: through education, vocational training and resettlement, "the refugee" would enter the modern world and acquire a new sense of self, while coming to terms with displacement.⁴ UNRWA education has also played a

significant role in national identity formation and political mobilization against Israeli dominance – an issue that I will come back to later. UNRWA schools were, for instance, deeply involved in the first Palestinian intifada starting in 1987, which eventually led to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and peace accords.

In the past decades, the quality of UNRWA schools has reportedly declined (Peteet 2005). Budget restrictions resulting in overcrowding and a lack of supplies in addition to prolonged conflict with destroyed school buildings, interrupted academic calendar and social problems have led to educational failures. Multiple reports indicate a rather alarming situation in UNRWA schools in the occupied territories, which led UNRWA to implement an education reform (UNRWA 2012; UNRWA Education Department 2015). UNRWA schools in the West Bank struggle with double shifts, early dropouts, low performance⁵ and a challenging socio-political environment. Especially in boys' schools, problems with discipline seem so large that some teachers resort to physical punishment, although it is forbidden. UNRWA schools are also subject to a great degree of bureaucracy. For instance, schools lack independent budgets, which means that the principals need to apply for funding for more or less all expenses except for salaries and school books (personal communication with principals in UNRWA schools). My experience from fieldwork in the occupied territories, which was confirmed in interviews with teachers and principals, is that many parents in refugee camps are very concerned about their children's schooling. In practice, however, they do little to help their children learn or are not very willing to cooperate with schools on educational issues. These challenges faced by UNRWA schools are not gender-neutral, as they seem related to gendered understandings of girls' and boys' roles within families, schools and the society at large.

At the same time, as the education offered by UNRWA is increasingly criticized locally for being underfunded and of low quality, the importance West Bankers put on higher education is mounting. A mother of seven in her mid-thirties, who herself had studied mathematics but now is a full-time housewife, emphasized the status many Palestinians attached to education: "The whole society is educated. If you haven't finished a bachelor, you're [considered] ignorant. That it's not a lot. A Bachelor? Oh, there are Masters! There are PhDs! People start judging each other based on the level of education."

bivalent about UNRWA. The agency has come to stand for both survival and political stalemate since there has not been any solution to their predicament.

⁵ However, UNRWA students achieve better in different international tests (for instance PISA) in comparison to students enrolled in Palestinian governmental schools (World Bank Group 2014,18).

4 In reality, many Palestinian refugees feel rather am-

Education continues to be a favored means to bounce back from the losses of land and other economic resources. Today in the Palestinian occupied territories, there is a virtual boom in higher education. New educational institutes are constantly opening. Studying for a college diploma or a university degree has become a normal part of life and becoming an adult. In Bethlehem, many young people also meet their future spouses during their time in college or university. One might even claim that to be educated is a patriotic endeavor among many Palestinians – higher education is understood as crucial for the Palestinian nation to survive. By becoming modern and well-educated many Palestinians hope that they will eventually be able to make their voices heard internationally and free themselves from Israeli dominance (Kanaaneh 2002).

The necessity to educate oneself cannot, however, be reduced to a cultural or national imperative. It is rather an existential issue. In a political situation where Israeli soldiers are increasingly “quick on the trigger” and individual Palestinian lives are being devalued, the sense of belonging to a threatened people increases. When life is constantly threatened, one response can be to insist on doing the most out of it by, for instance, getting educated. Most outside observers agree with local Palestinians in the occupied territories that their political and humanitarian situation is indeed deteriorating (see for example, UN OCHA 2016). Killings, injuries, forced displacements and restrictions on movement are great concerns for most people in the West Bank and Gaza as they continuously affect their daily lives. A non-existing peace process, Israeli hostilities and the effects of the last years’ wars in Gaza have further deteriorated the Palestinian economy and labor market (ILO 2015). Palestinian unemployment has reached more than 25 percent (Ibid, 10). At the time of fieldwork in 2012 there were also numerous strikes by Palestinian employees against the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah; teachers in government schools were protesting that they had not been paid for months. Taxi drivers and other employees joined the strike as acts of solidarity. A principal in one of the boys’ schools tried to explain to me the ways restricted mobility has affected his students and challenged their academic progress in the following words:

Our children have a limited horizon. They can’t imagine 200 km – how great that distance is – because they haven’t seen it. They can’t imagine the sea - they only see it on TV. This is our life. We [i.e., school staff] try to help as much as we can to deal with it and to understand them.

FIELDWORK

Two months of fieldwork was carried out in September and October 2012 in the Bethlehem area⁶ in the West Bank. The fieldwork included visits to six schools in ‘Aida, Dheisheh and Aroub camps (i.e., in or close to Bethlehem) along with informal interviews with the principals of these schools and general observation of everyday practices at the schools. Two of the visited schools were chosen for classroom observations and interviews with teachers, parents and students. Since UNRWA’s schools are sex-segregated and the focus of the study was connected to gender and educational performances, I chose one girls’ school and one boys’ school. After a discussion with UNRWA’s West Bank gender officer, I decided to primarily interview and observe ninth graders. The ninth grade is the last grade in UNRWA’s educational program in the West Bank; for secondary school, students are transferred to government schools. We reasoned that it would be valuable to know more about how ninth graders experience their schooling and their future options, since they were about to be transferred to the next educational level and within some years would need to make decisions about higher education. A total of 30 interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, school counselors, parents and students. Before starting each interview, I explained its purpose, how the data would be used and that only my field-assistants and I would read the full interview transcripts or interview notes. The parents also gave consent to the interviews with their children. In this article, all personal names have been changed as well as some biographical details to assure the anonymity of the interviewees. Interviews with students and their parents were carried out in their homes and they were recorded and transcribed. On the contrary, I only took notes during encounters with teachers and principals; these interviews took place either at the interviewees’ worksites or in the privacy of their homes. This was due to frequent conflicts between the educational department of UNRWA in the West Bank and its employees, which made those particular interviews more sensitive. Both my parents are teachers and therefore, in this particular study, I sometimes drew on the similarities and differences there are between the work of teachers in the West Bank and in Sweden when interviewing school staff. The interviews and observations were carried out with the help of two local field assistants, one female and one male.

Classroom observations went on for some weeks and were equally divided between the two selected

6 The Bethlehem governorate has an estimated population of about 200 000 inhabitants and includes the town of Bethlehem, the towns of Bayt Sahour and Bayt Jalla, three refugee camps and a number of villages. http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/betlhm.htm.

schools. The observations did not focus on specific students but more general classroom interactions and, therefore, I did not ask for the consent of all parents of all children. A bigger concern to me was the discomfort that several of the teachers felt with our presence in the classroom. The observations probably did not produce as valuable data as I had hoped. It would possibly have taken me several more months of fieldwork to gain the teachers' trust. However, being in school and attending class made it easier to establish contact with the youth. The youth often claimed that their teachers were nicer to them and gave more fun lessons when my field assistant and I were around.

This was not the first time I did research among camp refugees in the Bethlehem governorate. In addition to the ethnographic fieldworks for my MA in 2000 and PhD in 2003–2004, I have carried out intermittent ethnographic fieldwork there for about 20 months and most of the time I have stayed with host families in the local refugee community. I have also carried out fieldwork in schools in Gaza in 2009. In this article, I also draw on knowledge and data that extends far beyond the fieldwork in 2012.

As a non-Palestinian, non-Muslim, non-camp refugee, I unavoidably remain an outsider in refugee camps in the occupied territories. I speak colloquial Arabic but not being fluent adds to my otherness. Despite such undeniable facts, most Palestinian interlocutors welcome me and show interest in participating in my research. Many see me as a messenger to influential non-Palestinian audiences and as an eyewitness to their miseries. At times, I have been met by suspicion by refugees. Being Swedish has probably been a benefit, compared to being British or American for instance, since most Palestinians judge Sweden to be a comparatively pro-Palestinian country. The fact that I have extensive experience of doing fieldwork among Palestinian refugees and knowledge about the Palestinian condition also worked to my advantage. Most importantly, I have been lucky to work with Palestinian field assistants, who are well known and respected locally. Thanks to them, many doors have opened to me.

GENDER AND PALESTINIAN REFUGEE YOUTH

Few academic studies have focused specifically on Palestinian youth (exceptions include Chatty 2010; Fincham 2010; Hart 2008; Marshall 2013).⁷ Hart's article (2008) is one of the most relevant to this work;

⁷ There seems to be a trend of psychological studies that scan Palestinian children and youth for trauma (e.g., Qouta et al. 2008). NGO reports about Palestinian children are also frequent. Such reports have for instance dealt with human rights issues such as the Israeli imprisonment of Palestinian children (UNICEF 2013; Defence for Children International/Palestine Section 2015).

he writes about the construction of adolescent masculinity within a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, Jordan. Hart's argument is that a rather tough masculinity is vital to uphold the Palestinian nation-in-exile but also creates obstacles for male camp refugees when trying to make a living outside the camp. Fincham (2010) writes on the construction of Palestinian girlhood through the intersection of gender and nation in a refugee camp in South Lebanon. In her article, Fincham discusses Palestinian women's practical role and symbolic value within the national struggle in Lebanon and how those have changed over time. Today, an Islamic discourse influences many young women and girls. Some however adopt hybrid bodily practices for instance by wearing a Muslim headscarf with "Western clothes" such as tight jeans. Marshall's PhD thesis in geography (2013) is also of relevance. Marshall examines how youth between 10–13 years of age move and use space in the Balata refugee camp in the northern West Bank. He argues that so-called geographies of shame influence and constrain youth's mobility. Young women were affected more than young men, but they also employed different tactics to resist gender and age domination. Chatty (2010) has a regional and comparative perspective on Palestinian refugee youth. She outlines how not only prolonged refugeeness and collective memory of Palestine influence identity formation but also highlights the role of the different social and political contexts refugee youth grow up in depending on the host society. Empirically, this article adds to the rather limited research that exists on the construction of adolescent masculinity and femininity among Palestinian refugees. Rather than discussing either boyhood or girlhood, I try to show how the two genders reflect on each other and are formed in tandem.

Gender is, first of all, a concept that helps us understand and destabilize the social and cultural processes that create more essentialized distinctions and power relations between the sexes. I take inspiration from Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) work on gender as embodied and performed. In this perspective, gender is not the reason for specific behaviors but rather the outcome of a number of performative acts. Gender is not so much what one is as what one does. In this research, I focus on observable gendered practices in everyday life of teenage boys and girls and how they themselves as well as adults around them talked about their comportment and what it meant to be a Palestinian refugee girl or boy. While most of my interlocutors held the view that differences between teenage boys and girls were, to an extent, innate, many also reasoned that religious, political, social and cultural concerns about, for instance, modesty had an impact on adolescent behavior. They also recognized that gendered differences changed over time. To some extent, my interlocutors and I agreed that gendered identities were not fixed, but could at least be partially molded and recreated. As I will discuss further, such

molding and recreation of gendered identities and practices in relation to education were necessary both due to economic crisis in the occupied territories and a policy change within UNRWA that influenced the daily work in schools.

A note on patriarchy is also needed. Some studies on Palestinian gender relations employ the overarching concept of patriarchy to describe them (e.g., Fincham 2010; Sa'ar 2001). I agree with those studies that families and other social relations in Palestinian society are generally organized according to gender and that males are structurally favored. For instance, what support a divorced woman can expect from her immediate family is often much less than that of a divorced man. Other factors such as age and class are also significant for a person's or group's everyday lives and possibilities. A person's moral responsibilities reflect both gender and age distinctions in society. Male domination continues to pervade, but also intersects with other mechanisms of stratification (Crenshaw 1998); especially, the mechanisms employed by Israeli occupation towards Palestinians (e.g., Richter-Devroe 2011; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2008). My own experiences of long-term field research among Palestinian refugees show that a concept such as patriarchy tends to simplify or even hide a much more complex reality where daily life and community depend on reciprocal obligations (Gren 2015). My point of departure is close to that of Baxter (2007) and Muhanna (2013). They both discuss the intricate dynamics of power and responsibilities of men and women towards each other within Palestinian families. They thus succeed to complicate current postulations about male dominance and female subordination in the Middle East both within and outside academia (cf. Abu-Lughod 2002). This is not to say that there are no patriarchal relations among Palestinians, but to acknowledge the discrepancies between my interlocutors' ideological statements and everyday practices in addition to people's flexible and creative use of cultural notions and their struggles over power and status. Theoretically, this article points out that in some particular historical and political settings, patriarchal structures might, at least to some extent, be creatively used to women's advantage (see for example Kandiyoti 1983). Even in male-dominated societies where men tend to be the norm can masculinity, and in this case boyhood, be denoted by much ambivalence and even be a disadvantage. Now, I turn to the discussion of four thematically organized findings that shape the youth understandings of their gendered practices and performances.

NATURALIZATION OF GENDERED BEHAVIOR

An overwhelming majority of my informants (independent of being school staff, parent or student) tended to explain boys' and girls' different comportment in school as something natural. This naturaliza-

tion of gendered behavior was also used to legitimize sex-segregated schools. Male youth were in general considered lazy, wild and difficult to discipline. After having heard from informant after informant that schoolboys were more violent than schoolgirls I questioned the silence of Umm Kareem, a female teacher in her early thirties, on this issue:

Are there more [fights] or is the fight in the schoolyard more violent here [in the boys' school] than in the girls' school?

Umm Kareem: Because they are boys. The nature of the boys! They are a little bit violent because... You know what is the problem? If UNRWA schools would give more facilities for kids, especially to play during the break or in the sports classes, it would be very good for them [the students], for their health and for their behaviors. They don't have anything. Maybe karate, maybe football and that's it. In the girls' school, maybe they can do yoga, they can play football and basketball. Whatever, whatever! And girls in their nature they are quieter and meaner. I think boys are more innocent than girls.

Umm Kareem was at the time one of few female teachers who had experienced teaching in both boys' and girls' schools. Even if she enjoyed teaching boys, she also agreed that they were often violent. People, especially parents, frequently feared that boys would beat girls up if girls and boys would share the same classes and schools. A local UNRWA school, which had integrated the teaching of boys and girls in the early classes and had disciplinary problems, was given as a case in point. Many adult interlocutors also held the view that teachers needed to use physical punishment to control boys, since this was frequently seen as the only way to make them obedient. Especially some grown up men claimed that physical punishment had had positive effects on them when they were in school. As they remembered it, violent teachers were those they had learned most from. Today's ninth graders did not agree. To the contrary, several of the male youth underlined that they thought teachers used far too much physical punishment, often unfairly. Personally, I noticed that different forms of violence, ranging from violent play and fights between students, a school guard physically stopping students from leaving school before the last lesson, and teachers beating up disobedient students, were more present in boys' schools than in girls' schools.

Parents and school youth also frequently raised concerns that mixed schools would lead to inappropriate sexual conduct among older students. A boy in ninth grade, Eyad, whom I had known for nine years at the time of the interview, explained this in the following words:

It is better to separate [boys and girls]. Boys

are bad and dirty. We had that experience when they were building the girls' school. At that time [because of the construction work], they [boys and girls] were together. There were sexual relations between them. It's in all ages.

But do you think all boys in your class are bad like that?

Not all. Maybe 10 out of 40.

In this cultural context, such inappropriate sexual conduct does not necessarily imply sexual intimacy, but possibly that male and female youth held hands or spent time alone.

Further, the general tendency was to perceive female youth as more obedient and polite than their male counterparts. They basically listened in class and studied harder. Many of my interviewees also stressed that girls spent far more time at home than boys did, and while staying home girls also spent time on their schoolwork. One of the girls I interviewed, Abeer who went to dance classes in her leisure time, made the following reflection:

Boys are not interested in studying; they just go [to school] to spend time. But girls have no choice but to study. They have no distractions. Boys have lots of them. [...] It also depends on the student's ability. [Parents] know if their child is smart or not. For example, my mum knows it is normal that I'm smart. I will get much better grades than my brother. So she tries to concentrate more on my brother because she knows he is weaker. Most girls get higher grades than boys... Everyone expects girls to get higher grades.

Although, both female and male teachers often naturalized the behaviors of male and female youth, most of them explained that they would not mind mixed schools, while parents and students in general did. A majority of the teachers did not think it would be any problem to teach mixed classes. The teachers in both boys' and girls' schools also attempted to provide alternative ways of being male and female to their students. Female teachers were giving examples of themselves being educated workingwomen and also showed a wider range of dress styles than other women of the same age in the refugee camps. While the vast majority of grown up women in camps close to Bethlehem wear some kind of headscarf and modest dress, the female teachers dressed in more diverse ways. Male teachers claimed to talk about women's rights in class with their male students and gave concrete examples of situations when women's rights should not be restricted. They also gave examples of this while I was present in their classes, for instance by talking about domestic violence with the male youth, although I had the feeling this was because of

me and my study rather than a part of their normal teaching. It might thus be argued that the teachers tried to slightly widen the gendered imaginative horizons of their students, although they did so within a cultural frame, which was understood by and acceptable to the local refugee community.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DIFFERENT PLACES

Nadia had three brothers – two of whom were older than her and one younger. This evening after dinner the boys went out. Their father, who was tired after work and long commuting hours, had asked them to get out of his way. The boys were probably out somewhere in the neighborhood with their friends. Nadia was helping her mum with the dishes as she usually did. Her mum covered her hair with a headscarf and walked out on the veranda. She tried to spot her youngest son. Where is he? 'Eyad,' she repeatedly screamed out to the dark alleys of the camp. 'Yes,' the boy suddenly shouted back from the shadows of the nearby houses. 'Can you buy me some coffee?' Eyad came up to get some money and then disappeared again. Nadia finished washing up and sat down with her schoolbooks in front of the TV. She had some English exercises to revise until tomorrow.

These mundane routines are rather typical for a family evening in the refugee camps. Daughters help with household chores and do their homework. Sons go out to be with their friends and sometimes run errands for their parents. It is strikingly noticeable that even female youth who have different after-school activities (such as basketball training or theatre classes) are at home many more hours than their male peers. Few of the females met up with friends after school. Classes and breaks were the only opportunities available to spend time with their friends. Umm Ahmed, a mother of a female ninth grader, and basically all interlocutors (except from some of the boys themselves) explained this in very similar terms:

Girls are much better [in school]. It's shown in statistics and it's because they spend time at home. Boys spend time in the street; they play football and games on the Internet. The majority of girls always have higher grades. It's the same at *tawjihi* [senior high-school exam]. The first ten are always girls. Maybe boys are smarter, but they don't use much time on their studies.

According to local understandings, engagement in school among Palestinian refugee youth depends on their gendered engagement in several other places.

According to my field experiences in Palestinian refugee camps, female youth are often thought to be vulnerable and in need of protection by their family. Public places are seen as dangerous for them (see also Marshall 2013). Young girls play outside but

normally stop well before they reach puberty. Both grown up women and female youth are not supposed to walk around aimlessly but to have a clear destination when moving outside their homes (Baxter 2007). Those concerns about females and their mobility are related to cultural understandings of family honor in Palestinian society.⁸ Families in refugee camps tend to keep their female children at home to avoid rumors and a questioning of their chastity. Noreen, a social worker in one of the UNRWA girls' schools who herself grew up in one of the refugee camps, explained this as follows:

Some girls play in the street until a certain age. Maybe until they are ten. With organizations like Ibdaa [a local NGO] things have changed since they started mixed activities [i.e., for both girls and boys]. But it is still until a certain age [also in Ibdaa]. Girls then stop to go there and the boys continue. Parents are more concerned about their daughters than about their sons. They hear stories about rape, kidnappings and beatings.

But should they not also worry about their boys?

Yes, they should! They think boys are less affected emotionally and physically [by difficult experiences]. If a girl is raped she will be more affected [than if a boy is raped].

Locally, many would also argue that if a girl is raped, the effect would not be only emotional but also social; the girl's reputation would be tarnished.

Many male youth, on the other hand, spend much of their time after school with their friends outside their homes. They often have different arranged activities (mostly sports) and run errands for their family, but most of the time, they hang out with their peers in the street, at Internet cafés or at youth clubs. As both Hart (2008) and Marshall (2013, 150) write, male youth often feel pressed to defend their neighborhood from others living in other parts of the camp and I would also add from the occasional invasions of the Israeli army. Moreover, the camp was a place for networking. By being engaged in the street and the neighborhood, they were forming social relations with male youth, which were considered important for their future. Establishing themselves within such networks of teenage boys gave them access to a male sphere of youth. It was by being successful in those networks that male youth could gain local status and count on future support

⁸ This is not the place to dwell on the complexities of the norms, practices and social negotiations related to a Palestinian honor code (Baxter 2007). Here it suffices to say that there are many different ways to interpret honor and to lead an honorable life among Palestinian individuals as well as groups.

in different difficult situations (see also Hart 2008). Such support could be economic, social and political. Their social contacts could for instance help them get a job in the future. Political support could both be related to internal Palestinian politics (for instance in a local election to an association in the camp) or to the Israeli occupation (for instance by being helped economically if a family member is arrested). Female youth, on the other hand, are not seen as needing to establish such social networks.

Restlessness is moreover understood as a male personality trait. In refugee camps in the West Bank, one can frequently notice boys from the age of about eleven roaming around the streets and alleys of the camps. They wait for something to happen and are often out late. It is not unusual that male youth are out until 12 o'clock on a weekday or later as Abu Layth, a male teacher, gave an example of: "The [male] children are not controlled by their families either. When I go for the morning prayers in the mosque [i.e., by dawn] I meet some of my students out on the street. It is four o'clock in the morning!" Although many local parents do think that it is a problem that boys are out late, there seems to be a general agreement that boys cannot be kept at home or are at least very difficult to keep at home. They are also sometimes asked to leave the house (Marshall 2013). Being at home seems to be against boys' (as well as grown up men's) gendered nature.

In Palestinian society and maybe especially in its refugee camps, some places are considered immoral for one gender, but not for the other (Gren 2015; Marshall 2013; Rothenberg 2004). It is not an exaggeration to conclude that Palestinian refugee female youth perform femininity by staying at home and by not playing in the street after a certain age (cf. Butler 1990). Palestinian male refugee youth, on the other hand, perform masculinity by roaming around the camp, being out late and not being at home all the time. The street is a moral place for male youth and to some extent for men, but not for female youth and only partly for grown up women. Vice versa, home is a moral place for female youth and women, but only partly for male youth and men. Males who spend much time at home are often considered weird and unmanly (see also Hart 2008).

IMAGINING A FUTURE AS PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

As mentioned earlier, Palestinian females in general perform better in school than males. In recent years, more women than men joined universities and obtained a university degree (PCBS 2015, 31). During fieldwork in 2012, it was often outlined to me that women with a higher education were increasingly popular in the marriage market: a fact that is probably related to a severe economic situation in which more and more bachelors and their families think of educated workingwomen as means to sus-

tain healthy family finances. This emerging approach is slowly replacing one that saw educated working-women as obstacles to male dominance and ill-suited to raise children. Several interlocutors also pointed out that higher education gave women the possibility to be economically independent for instance in case their spouses die or become incarcerated. Umm Tareq, female teacher in a girls' school, explained:

Those [men] who get married have no money. If a woman continues [her education] and starts to work, she will get married quickly. Her husband will like that she has an income. I try to tell the [female] students about the importance of education. 'You don't all need university degrees, a diploma is ok.' The cleaning lady we had here [at school] was smarter than some of the teachers. Her son and her husband died in an accident in the camp so she had to start working here. I take this as an example. It means that in the end you depend on yourself [economically]. Another example is a relative of mine. She married early and her husband did not like her to get educated. Still she studied for a diploma for kindergarten teachers. Now the husband is in prison and she is trying to find a job in a kindergarten. But a diploma is not enough these days and the salary is only 500 Israeli shekels per month.

This is a rather exceptional development, since many elderly refugee women were prevented from attending schooling and thus remain illiterate. Working mothers have also been a disputed issue in many conservative refugee families.

School is a place that promises social mobility for female youth more than for their male counterparts. For female youth, the possibility for a higher social status and for gaining an income is to a large extent connected to education. This is still governed by local views on where women should work. Palestinian refugee women have fewer options in the labor market than men.⁹ Workingwomen without education have rather limited possibilities to find employment opportunities that are considered appropriate for females. Appropriate manual work for a woman could mean working as cleaner, a hairdresser or a

9 A man without education has a number of options within construction, agriculture, restaurants, hotel sector, and the transport sector. He is also more likely to open and run his own business than a woman. Palestinian refugee men from the Bethlehem area can also work in Israel (with or without a work permit) or try to migrate to find employment abroad. Refugee women also work in Israel, but it is often considered morally problematic in local communities (Gren 2015; Moors 1995). Women are thought to be easily influenced by Israeli society and should therefore avoid it. Palestinian economic migration is typically a male phenomenon.

seamstress. Higher education is also said to ensure them a better marriage deal and a stronger position within their future marriages (cf. Sa'ar 2006). It is generally believed among my interviewees that children need educated mothers. Most would claim that an educated mother, whether employed or not, can help her children with their homework and will raise them in a better, more conscious way than an uneducated mother. Kanaaneh (2002) writes about such family ambitions as a project of modernity among Palestinians.

In the interview material, it became clear that Palestinian refugee families hold very little hope for an ameliorated political situation in the Palestinian territories due to the stalemate in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the disempowerment of the Palestinian authorities.¹⁰ However, most held great expectations in their children's future lives. People wanted their children to get educated and believed that, through higher education, their children would lead better lives than their parents. However, as I will discuss below, especially when it comes to male youth, there is some uncertainty about those bright futures.

TAMING PALESTINIAN MALE REFUGEE YOUTH THROUGH UN SCHOOLING

In the summer of 2011, the West Bank was struck by a heatwave that seemed to go on forever. One evening, I went to visit an old friend of mine – Umm Ramzy – a single-mum and pharmacist who came from the Dheisheh refugee camp but at the time of our meeting lived just outside of it. It turned out that Umm Ramzy was still on her way back from work. Her son Nidal, 14 years old, welcomed me and told me to wait for his mum. Then, he wanted to show me something. 'Come,' said Nidal. I followed Nidal to the room he shared with his older brother. Nidal walked up to his chest of drawers and opened one of the drawers. He picked up a black balaclava and held it up for me, while saying: 'I use this one when I throw stones at the soldiers.' 'Is it yours?' I asked skeptically. 'Do you throw stones?' 'Yeah, when the soldiers come to the camp during the night, my friends and I usually throw stones at them.' The air stood still despite the open windows. I kept silent, while thinking that I had to tell Umm Ramzy about this. But then it struck me that she probably already knew.

In Palestinian rural areas before the flight in 1948, male youth (*shabab*) were traditionally supposed to defend fellow villagers (Kanaana 1998). As I wrote earlier, many young males feel obliged to

10 At present there are two Palestinian authorities, one Hamas-led ruling Gaza and one Fatah-led ruling the West Bank. Both of them have authoritarian tendencies.

defend their neighborhood or camp from outside intruders – either fellow camp inhabitants, other Palestinians or Israeli soldiers. The fearless fighter remains an ideal for young men. Masculinity is also related to stoic suffering, through the endurance of for instance Israeli incarceration and aggression (Peteet 1994; Malmström 2015). The refugee and the refugee camp have long been emblematic to Palestinian patriotism. Khalili (2007) writes that the camps and its inhabitants symbolize resistance and suffering – important foundations within national identity-formation – both for the national leadership as well as the public. The understanding of Palestinian male refugee youth as politicized is thus nothing new. Like Nidal above, many refugee male youth feel responsible to carry out small acts of violent resistance towards often heavily armed Israeli soldiers by, for instance, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. A mother I interviewed, Umm Ali, commented on how teachers need to handle the wish of male youth to be involved in such confrontations: “In the boys’ school [in the camp], I don’t know [if they are good teachers] ... [laughing]. Some [teachers] are devoted. They try to control [the boys] so they don’t go to throw stones. Because they [i.e., the school] are near the wall and the military post.” This statement highlights the pressure visible signs of oppression, such as the Israeli-built wall or the separation barrier, puts on Palestinian individuals, in this case school boys, but also hints at the ambivalent feelings among many parents concerning stone-throwing. It also tells us about an extra-curricular role of UNRWA schools; namely, trying to prevent the engagement of male youth with violence against Israel.

In the Palestinian context, UNRWA education has been used earlier for political mobilization and national identity-formation in a condition of statelessness and exile (Alzaroo 2005; Shabaneh 2012). UNRWA schools along with local universities in the occupied territories took active part in the first Palestinian intifada. Schools participated in demonstrations or went on strike to object Israeli occupation. For individual students, those frequent disruptions of their education, in addition to Israeli detentions of young Palestinians, were destructive to their accomplishments in school, although many felt that the uprising empowered them politically. During my fieldwork in 2003–2004, several men, who had been imprisoned as teens during the first uprising, exclaimed that they belonged to a lost generation. Although they were often proud of their activism and their patriotic sacrifices as ex-prisoners, they were well aware they had lost out academically. Many of them had not gone back to school or had never been able to start a university education (Gren 2015).

Being the only UN agency created specifically to serve one particular refugee population along with its long-term engagement, UNRWA has an extensive involvement with the population it intends to help.

Many local UNRWA employees are Palestinian refugees themselves, even if the high level positions tend to be held by foreigners and policy is frequently made far from the Middle East (Bocco 2010; Peteet 2005). This often enables the agency to work efficiently and to adapt to the refugees’ needs. The proximity has also led to charges that the organization is too close to the refugees and even hostage to their political claims (Al Husseini 2010). Since UNRWA leaders speak out compassionately about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the occupied territories and the agency publishes numerous reports on human rights violations against Palestinian refugees, UNRWA is often under attack by Israel and the US, accused of being too pro-Palestinian or too biased. UNRWA’s response has been to try to distinguish itself as politically neutral (Ibid). One recent strategy in this direction has been “to keep politics out of schools” as some of the UNRWA staff and parents I interviewed put it. They also said that teachers and principals had been instructed to remain politically neutral, both in relation to internal Palestinian party politics and to external political conflicts, particularly with Israel. For example, Abu Akram, a father of a boy in the 9th grade complained that:

Earlier the most important [in school] were the teachers. They were part of the people and the country. Teachers 30 years ago were not stuck to schoolbooks. Before they were more loyal [to our cause] and they were fighters. Now there is corruption even among the teachers. They are not allowed to raise the Palestinian flag or to make a ceremony for a martyr in class. In other parts of the Middle East, it’s allowed. In Jordan, Lebanon and Syria [but not here].

Funerals for martyrs (a word used for any Palestinian, either militia or a newborn child, who is killed by Israel) frequently turn into political manifestations against Israeli occupation (Gren 2015). Earlier UNRWA schools and especially boys’ schools often took part in such politicized ceremonial rituals.¹¹ Similar to funerals, open discussions of party politics are also to be avoided according to the UNRWA leadership. This is strikingly different from the times when schools used to have political and patriotic debates.

Such de-politicization or de-nationalization of UNRWA schools, in addition to a context distinguished by prolonged crisis and despair, seems to render school increasingly pointless for many Pal-

11 Other than being political manifestations, these funerals are also ways to deal with losses and grief in the local community (Gren 2015). Trying to prevent school children from participating in these manifestations can thus inhibit them from taking part in local resilience tactics.

estinian male refugee youth. As long as UNRWA education was seen as a vehicle for politicization and such political activity carried a certain status in society, it was meaningful for male youth to engage with educational institutions in multiple ways. Today, local social networks, which are developed outside of home and school, in the street, seem to become increasingly important, especially since people depend on such networks to get employed.

CONCLUSION

How male and female youth perform (in Butler's sense) in different places, for instance in school, tells us a great deal about gender and social change among Palestinian camp refugees. Male Palestinian refugee youth perform masculinity by being mobile outside of their home throughout the day and sometimes also at night. Females, on the other hand, perform femininity by being mostly immobile and thus staying at home after school and, by extension, having time to do their homework. The current de-politicization of UNRWA schools turns schools into an extension of home. This is a safe moral place for females, which also implies possibilities for future social mobility. For many male youth, however, it has partly become less meaningful since it has lost some of its political force due to new policies within UNRWA. Further, education does not necessarily give the male youth a job. Jobs are rather provided through social contacts that are created and maintained locally.

In addition, I explained that changing gendered practices in relation to education were influenced by a context of severe unemployment and economic stagnation. Within Palestinian households, women's wage labor is increasingly valued in attempts to strengthen household economics. However, uneducated workingwomen have rather limited possibilities to find employment that are considered culturally appropriate for Palestinian females. Future social mobility for female youth is thus, to a large extent,

connected to education. Male youth have, on the other hand, options to find employment in different sectors and in different places, including in other countries. It is noteworthy that although the occupied territories are stuck in a political and economic deadlock, Palestinian society undergoing a transformation in gender relations and ideals of femininity and masculinity.

This article shows that patriarchal constraints might be innovatively used for females' benefit. First, the policing or protection of female youth, by keeping them at home, indirectly lead to unexpected (and sometimes unwanted changes) in gender relations among Palestinian refugee families. Since female youth are more likely to study and get high grades, they are also increasingly completing higher education. As most of my interlocutors would agree, having higher education gives a woman a much stronger position within her future marriage. An educated woman, and even more so if she has her own income, will have good chances to be resourceful and powerful within her family (cf. Sa'ar 2006). Ironically though, in the current state of affairs, it is the policing of girls and young women that may emancipate them, at least when it comes to labor market participation.

Second, for female youth, whose gender identities have never really been bound by political activism to the same extent as male youth's (even though there clearly are politically engaged and active Palestinian women), a depoliticized UN education is not really a problem. For male youth, however, it threatens an important part of what it means to be a Palestinian refugee male, for example, being ready to protect the local community and resist Israeli occupation hands-on. Moreover, the freedom (or lack of policing) of male refugee youth within families seems to clash with increased policing in UNRWA schools. Such collision creates ambivalences and uncertainties about manhood itself.

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