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DOI
10.2307/jj.5076197.8
10.11116/9789461665423

Publication date
2023

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Muslim Marriage and Non-Marriage

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Saleh, S., & Moors, A. (2023). Palestinian Women Prisoners: The Relational Politics of Incarceration, Marriage, and Separation. In J. McBrien, & A. Moors (Eds.), *Muslim Marriage and Non-Marriage: Where Religion and Politics Meet Intimate Life* (pp. 103-123). (Islam, Culture & Society). Leuven University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.5076197.8, https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461665423

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Palestinian Women Prisoners: The Relational Politics of Incarceration, Marriage, and Separation

Samah Saleh and Annelies Moors

Introduction

Tahrir, Samira, and Ahed, three of our key-interlocutors, have all spent considerable time in Israeli prisons.[1] After Tahrir was sentenced to a long prison term, she married a man who had been sentenced to life imprisonment, while she was still in prison. When she was released as a result of the Oslo Accords, he divorced her so that she could remarry. After she remarried and had a child, she was incarcerated again; this time her husband decided to wait for her release. Samira, whose fiancé had been martyred before the marriage contract was signed, had remained single in prison. After her release she married a man who had been sentenced to life imprisonment. Years later, after she had been imprisoned again, he quite unexpectedly wanted a divorce. Ahed had gone to prison as the widow of a martyr. She had wanted to remarry while in prison, but her family convinced her not to do so. Some time after her release, she remarried a man from the same political organization as her martyred husband. While these three women were all imprisoned for long periods of time, this brief vignette already indicates that their marriage stories vary considerably.

In this article we analyze how resistance, incarceration, marriage, and separation are interrelated in the lives of Palestinian women political prisoners. Since 1967 more than 800,000 Palestinians have been detained or arrested under Israeli military orders in the occupied territories. Whereas Palestinian women have a long history of resisting the Israeli occupation, the number of incarcerated men far outnumbers that of their female counterparts.[2] This is both because political activism is gendered, with men having a stronger presence in militant, armed resistance,[3] and because women who are imprisoned stand a greater chance of being released early, as their release is at the top of the list of demands in prisoner exchanges.[4] As a result, authors interested in how incarceration has affected women often focus on the experiences of the wives of male political prisoners. Both Segal (2013, 2015)

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and Giacaman and Johnson (2013) have analyzed the ambiguous position in which these women find themselves. Whereas they are publicly celebrated and idealized, in everyday life they face the problems of life with an absent–present husband. The norm is that these women sacrifice themselves; they are expected to put their lives on hold and to care for their children while they wait for their husband's release.[5] Often still young and viewed with some suspicion, they are expected to stay under the authority of their in-laws, and to live for the brief moments they are allowed to visit their husbands, which entails a grueling journey to and from the prisons that are located in Israel.

Studies that focus on Palestinian women prisoners themselves (such as Abdo 2011; Bayour 2004; Meari 2015; Shwaikh 2022) describe the gendered and sexualized ways in which the Israeli interrogators deal with Palestinian women prisoners.[6] Next to facing similar forms of torture as men, such as beatings, being locked in very small places and tied in very painful positions, women prisoners also face gender-specific forms of physical and psychological violence: the refusal to provide them with sanitary products during long periods of interrogation, intrusive and violent strip searches, and sexualized insults and violence. Israeli interrogators also attempt to undermine women's morale by targeting their families, using methods such as bringing close kin to the prison to threaten, humiliate, and attack them in the prisoners' presence (Abdo 2008; Shwaikh 2022). Sexual shaming, a well-known colonial technique to exert control (McBrien 2021), is not only used as a means to push the imprisoned women to talk, but also to generally discourage women from engaging in political activism, to lower the standing of their families in the community, and to weaken the Palestinian social fabric (see also Abdallah 2015; Francis 2017; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009).

Some authors underline the need to shift the focus from how colonial power works to the agency of Palestinian women prisoners. Meari (2015) shows that these women resist attempts at sexual shaming by resignifying their experiences during interrogation as an enactment of *sumud* (the Arabic term for steadfastness). In the Palestinian context, *sumud* has come to refer to a wide range of forms of resistance, varying from staying put and trying to live a normal life under abnormal circumstances to forms of community building and engaging in the reproduction of Palestinian culture and society.[7] For those under interrogation *sumud* stands for non-cooperation with the Israeli security agents. By refusing to be affected by sexualized threats of violence, women prisoners and their supporters challenge the association of dignity with women's sexuality and instead link dignity to *sumud*, to remaining steadfast (see also Abdo 2008, 183).[8] In this article, discussing the relation between incarceration, marriage, and separation, we also move from the negative effects of incarceration for the women concerned, to how they themselves act with respect to marriage and separation. It is true that concerns about sexual abuse may

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diminish women's chances to marry and that for those already engaged or married, incarceration may lead to a separation (Shwaikh 2022; Bayour 2004). Yet, many of our interlocutors highlighted how they themselves had opted for a particular kind of marriage or for a separation, foregrounding their agentic power.

Theoretically, a focus on the relation between incarceration and marriage is part of the broader debate on how politics and intimate relations relate to and impact on each other (Amarasuriya et al. 2020; Kelly 2019). As positionality is multiple, those engaged in acts of resistance cannot be considered as political actors only, nor can their aspirations be reduced to the political. In a society where marriage is socially, culturally, and religiously highly valued and a crucial marker of adulthood, entering into a marriage is an aspiration many share. This is the more so as marriage is the only legitimate framework for producing children, and more generally central to the reproduction of families, communities, and the Palestinian nation.

Recognizing that producing a boundary between politics and intimate relations is in itself a political act (Ferguson 1994), our main interest is in whether and how intimate relations become politicized or not in particular spatial-temporal contexts and relational encounters. Hence, we investigate how our interlocutors themselves conceptualize and engage with the relations between politics and intimate relationships (Candea 2011). Acknowledging that aspirations and their enactments in the fields of resistance/incarceration and marriage/separation are interrelated, the empirical question is then *how* they are related. Commitments to the resistance and to intimate others, such as kin and partners, may strengthen each other, but they may also push in different directions. Those active in the resistance may engage in actions or refuse to do so, because of their love and respect for intimate others, their perceived need to protect them, or their refusal to hurt and harm them. Close intimate relationships may support, but may also stand in tension with, loyalty to political organizations and resistance movements. Moreover, both intimate relationships and political activism are not only sites of mutual support, solidarity, and care; they may also be locations of inequality and domination. As many have recognized, gender hierarchies are not only present in politics and the labor market, but also in the family (Young, Wolkowitz, and McCullagh 1982). Conceptualizing kin and intimate relations as primarily characterized by sharing and mutual support (Sahlins 2013) does not do justice to forms of inequality and distrust that may simultaneously be present (Carsten 2013; Geschiere 2013).

In the following we start with a discussion of whether and how intimate relations of kinship and marriage motivate women to become politically active and ask which relationships have had an important impact on their political trajectories, be it to encourage or to impede their commitment to and engagement with the resistance. Next, we analyse how their experiences with incarceration have affected how and with whom they enter into a marriage, and whether other concerned parties,

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such as kin and the political movement they are affiliated with, have been involved in bringing these marriages about. In the last section we discuss how women's incarceration influences when and how couples decide to end their engagement or marriage, tracing who initiates the dissolution and their motivations to do so. But before entering into the substance of our arguments, we first briefly describe how we have collaborated in this project and what kinds of methods we have used.

On collaboration and methods

To grasp how incarceration and intimate relations intersect, we have worked with ethnographic methods, and, in particular, with topical life stories (Bertaux 1981). Such a life story approach, focusing on the specific topics of incarceration and marriage, works well to trace connections between societal transformations and biographical life courses, centering the perspectives and the experiences of the women involved. Both entering into a marriage and dissolving one are not distinct moments but processual events. Life stories encourage us to link the past (how subjectivities are shaped) and the future (the kinds of aspirations our interlocutors presented) with respect to politics as well as marriage.

In this article we build on our previous work. Samah Saleh has done extensive research with, and written her PhD dissertation about, Palestinian women who had been imprisoned in the Israeli colonial prison system (Saleh 2016; also 2021; 2022). Working with in-depth interviews and life stories, she has analysed the experiences of these women in prison and investigated how their encounters in prison have shaped their subjectivities. She has traced the connections between incarceration and women's lives prior to arrest, as well as how incarceration has affected their lives after their release. Annelies Moors has been involved in long-term topical life story research with Palestinian women and has focused on the multiple positions women take up when entering into and leaving a marriage, with specific attention paid to "political marriages" (Johnson, Abu Nahleh, and Moors 2009; Johnson and Moors 2020; Moors 1995). From 2017 to 2019, we jointly conducted topical life story interviews with former women prisoners about how they entered into a marriage and/or how these marriages ended. These open-ended topical life story interviews have been further contextualized through informal conversation and participant observation. We have both been involved in the empirical research, conducted part of the interviews together, and collaborated in the analysis of the material.

In total we have held conversations with more than thirty former women prisoners.[9] They differ in terms of age, educational level, class position, religious belonging, and political affiliation. Some have grown up in highly politicized homes, others were motivated by their concrete experiences with the injustices

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of the occupation, some were recruited by political or military groups, others actively sought these out themselves, and after their release from prison, some were supported by their families and communities, while others faced forms of censure and rejection.

Our interlocutors have entered prison at various historical moments, from the late 1970s until 2020. Both the prison population has changed through time as well as how society perceives of political activism and incarceration. Whereas the early generation of women prisoners was often well-educated, politically committed to and involved in secular nationalist or left-wing movements, more recently the prison population has become more diverse. First, with the emergence of Islamic movements, also more women associated with these movements have been incarcerated. Second, after the Oslo accords, there has been a shift in political climate. Whereas prior to these accords, especially during the first intifada, there was a strong emphasis on collective struggle and resistance, thereafter there has been a greater concern with individual material well-being in a context of state-building and a broader turn to consumption. The PA (Palestinian Authority) has taken up some responsibilities toward the material needs of the prisoners, yet many former prisoners are disillusioned with the diminished societal appreciation for the sacrifices they have made (Giacaman and Johnson 2013; Johnson, Abu Nahleh, and Moors 2009).[10]

Our research includes women from different political orientations, both left-wing secular organizations and Islamic groups. We have mainly worked with former political prisoners who had longer prison sentences. Many would fit the term *munadilat*, that is women resistance fighters, and some were active in military organizations (also Abdo 2008). Our research does not claim to be statistically representative, but aims to gain insights into how these politically committed women talk about and reflect on entering into and leaving a marriage. We are well aware that their narratives are always told in hindsight, that is, that they are contemporary reflections on past events that are also shaped by how their lives have unfolded after their release and by how they perceive the present.

Prior to incarceration: Family, resistance, and marriage

Some of our interlocutors were already engaged or married prior to their incarceration. This raises the broader question of how kinship and marriage intersect with their political activism and acts of resistance. Were the women already politically committed prior to entering into an engagement or marriage? Did their engagement or marriage have an impact on their activism?

As mentioned previously, engaging in political activism and resistance is not only the effect of politico-ideological convictions; intimate relationships,

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commitments, and loyalties to particular individuals may also have an impact. One recurrent pattern in the narratives of our interlocutors is the atmosphere or the environment they grew up in. They often hailed from families with a long history, sometimes an inter-generational history, of political engagement and anti-colonial resistance. Some families had a long-standing involvement with a specific political or resistance organization, be it secular left-wing or Islamic. But also when there was not such a commitment to a particular party, our interlocutors referred to growing up in a nationalist environment. Many were also personally affected, because close kin, such as a father or a brother, had been martyred or incarcerated for long periods of time.

Here we return to our key interlocutors, Samira, Tahrir, and Ahed, and briefly present the environment they grew up in. Samira, born and raised in a larger village, underlined that it was the atmosphere at home that had stimulated her to become active. Her grandfather, a fugitive in the days of the British colonization, had been executed by the British military and her grandmother was someone with a strong fighting spirit; Samira referred to her as the one who had "sown the seeds." Her own mother had become responsible for raising seven children, after she had become widowed when Samira was still very young. "My mother was not educated, but she was much attached to the land and strongly supported the national struggle," Samira said. "With the first intifada, when four of us were in prison, she would often come to visit us, she never said why did you do this or complain about our activism, that is what stimulated me. And my brothers never gave me the feeling that a woman is weak." Her strong ties with her siblings, especially with the brother who was incarcerated multiple times, were evident. Considering herself a religious person, even if not very strict, Samira, like her brothers, had become affiliated with an Islamic group. What had counted most for her was its strong commitment to the resistance. Still, not everyone in the family was similarly involved. None of her sisters has become politically active, and also one of her brothers was far less involved than the others.

By the late 1990s, when Samira was in her later twenties, she had started to work for an educational association. There she got acquainted with a man who was also active in the resistance and they decided to become engaged. But their marriage never materialized. Immediately after he had spent a brief period in prison and was released, he was the victim of a targeted assassination. "We had planned to formalize everything on Friday and on the Sunday before that he was martyred," Samira said, showing us the ring he had given her, which she had always kept. It did not take long before Samira herself was imprisoned.

Tahrir recalled that she had already been drawn to the resistance as a little girl when she visited her family in Jordan in the late 1960s. At the time many young people were involved in the resistance, and she had become much impressed by

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the *fedayyeen*. Next, she mentioned how her two-year older brother, "who used to play revolutionary songs," was killed by the Israelis. Not long thereafter, when she was in her last year of high school, she became engaged. Before the young couple could marry, her fiancé was imprisoned. He had been involved in a military attack on Jewish settlers and was sentenced to life.

It was after this had happened that Tahrir decided to become active in the resistance herself. Without her family's knowledge she took part in military training. Some years earlier she had already become, in her words, "very religious." At the time there were no Islamic organizations so she joined a mainstream nationalist group. By the time she was imprisoned in the late 1980s, she had become affiliated with an Islamic organization. She was, however, not very interested in party politics and considered these organizations only as a means, not an end in themselves; after the Oslo Accords she had become disillusioned with all political parties. Whereas she had mentioned her fiancé's imprisonment as motivating her to become active in the resistance, she also strongly believed that what mattered was "that you act out of conviction, not only because you are related to certain people. You have to emphasize that we have the legal right to resist otherwise we will simply be terrorists."

In contrast to Samira and Tahrir, Ahed hailed from a family with a long history of involvement in a left-wing secular group. As if to underline this, she explained to us, "I was born into our political group, I inherited it with my mother's milk." Her grandfather had already been involved in the party in its foundational days and had become a leader. Her mother's uncle had been martyred, her brothers had also been imprisoned off and on, and she had become familiar with the army's harassment as they regularly came to the family home. At the same time, she described the village where she lived as socially conservative and her father as "a religious man."

When Ahed was fourteen, she had become informally engaged to her cousin, the six years older son of her father's sister. As Ahed disclosed, they were in love with each other, and after some discussion the family agreed to the match. Five years later the young couple married. Her husband's family had a similar history of involvement in the resistance as her own. The couple had only lived together for one year, when, soon after the second intifada had started, her husband had become a leader of the resistance and a "wanted person." From then on, their marital life became unpredictable. At most they would see each other twice a month, at different locations but not in the village, as the Israeli military often came to their house in the village searching for him. He succeeded in evading the Israeli military for more than four years before they located and summarily executed him. The next day the Israeli army blew up the couple's house. Shortly thereafter, Ahed's father-in-law became seriously ill and passed away while being held up at a military checkpoint on the way to the hospital.

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Ahed was much affected by this all and wanted to act. However, her husband had explicitly stated that were he ever martyred, he did not want her to participate in the resistance. He also had not wanted her to join during his lifetime because he had been very concerned about his mother. As his brothers were all in prison and she had suffered a lot, he preferred Ahed to stay with, and care for his mother. Well-aware of her husband's wishes, the party leaders at first turned Ahed away when she wanted to become actively involved in the resistance. But when she persisted and threatened to go to another group, they gave in and accepted her. While preparing for action, Ahed was arrested and sentenced to six years.

Marriage after incarceration

The narratives of our interlocutors about interrogation are similar to what human rights organizations and other scholars have reported. Especially, but not only, during the period of interrogation conditions are very harsh. Our interlocutors mention physical and psychological violence, including sexual harassment, such as violent strip searches, a prohibition against wearing the hijab, and threats about detaining their kin and partners. Yet, they also underlined that they were well-aware that their interrogators use sexual violence as a threat precisely because it is a sensitive issue in Palestinian society.

Sexual violence is not so much publicly discussed in Palestine as it is the subject of rumor and informal talk. As one of our interlocutors said, "When you leave prison people ask 'Did anything happen to you?' It is obvious that they mean rape. But that does not happen."[11] Some would simply shrug their shoulders and consider it "normal" that people would ask, adding, "But that are threats, they want to make you afraid, but it does not really happen." Others, in contrast, were indignant, as they considered such questions as further evidence of how unequally society deals with men and women, even when they have been incarcerated. As Samira said, "People only focus on the negative effects of imprisonment, no one asks you, what did you learn in prison," adding "People always talk… what matters is the family. If your family supports you, it does not matter if people talk, that will not affect you. Your family can lift you up or make you fall."

Samira underlined that her family had always been very supportive. Still, it is not only a supportive family that makes a difference, also the status of the family in the community mattered. In Samira's words, "Also, our family has a good position in the village, that is why we get a lot of support, no one can talk about us." The situation could be a lot more difficult if families did not have such a position. Take, for instance, Lama's experiences. Her father, affiliated with a left-wing party, also had a long history of activism in the resistance and had often been imprisoned, but

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her family was quite isolated in the village. Her father's relations with his brothers were strained and the family had for some time left the village and lived elsewhere. After Lama's brother had been martyred in the second intifada, her 15-year-old sister attacked a settler. When she did not come home, and before it became known that she had been arrested, there were rumors that she had run away with a man. This had affected her very much and after she was released four years later, she kept her distance from people. About a decade later Lama and her brother were arrested; both were sentenced to two years. Reflecting on her time in prison, Lama talked about the solidarity among prisoners, but also said she had a difficult time when she had some issues with one of the women leaders. After her release there was the usual public celebration, but most of her girlfriends had broken off their friendship. In Lama's case, a sense of isolation permeated her narrative.

Whether incarceration makes it more difficult for women to marry is an issue our interlocutors often discussed. Some agreed that it may indeed be harder for a woman ex-prisoner to get married than for a man in a similar position. All were familiar with cases of a fiancé who broke off an engagement or a husband who wanted a divorce. Others would qualify this and mention the many women ex-prisoners who did get married. Next to this, our interlocutors pointed out that men who had been imprisoned also faced problems. The historical moment also mattered a lot (Johnson, Abu Nahleh, and Moors 2009). Whereas during times of heightened popular resistance, such as during the first intifada, activists were held in high regard, this changed after the Oslo Accords that had turned hope into disappointment and despair. By the end of the 1990s activist men had become far less desirable as spouses, because of the risks of re-imprisonment, the problems they faced in finding employment with the Palestinian Authority (PA), and concerns about their physical and mental health after release (Giacaman and Johnson 2013). When we asked Samira whether it was more difficult for a woman to marry after she had been in prison, she explained, "That may be so, but also men face problems. When we tried to find a bride for my brother, this was difficult, because his brother had been incarcerated for a long period of time. They were worried that our house was marked, that he would be a target for both the Israelis and the PA." Our interlocutors nevertheless agreed that the effects for women were often more severe, also because age (the possibility to bear children) was a strongly gendered consideration.

Political subjectivity and political marriages

The narratives of women ex-prisoners about how they evaluated potential husbands often included a discussion about the latter's politics and commitment to the resistance. Entering into a marriage not only connects individuals, but also their

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families and social networks. Marriages are often concluded between people who are in some way close or similar to each other, be it in terms of educational level, religion, location, nationality, kinship, or class. Yet as individuals always have multiple positionalities, being close in some respect usually means being more distant in other respects. In other words, concluding a marriage activates particular forms of closeness. What matters here is whether and how political affiliation, "political closeness" as it were, is at stake when opting for a specific marriage partner (Johnson, Abu Nahleh, and Moors 2009).

For those who are or have spent time in prison, the political engagement of a potential spouse is particularly important. Whereas it is true that many of our interlocutors came from politicized environments, incarceration pushed the development of a strong political subjectivity further. As Saleh (2016, 2021) points out, incarcerated women are isolated during interrogation, but once the interrogation period has ended, they become part of a collective prison body in which political affiliations matter. Lacking privacy, they become especially close to their cellmates, who are often from the same political organizations. These close ties continue after their release. As ex-prisoners, they are under surveillance often not only by the occupation forces but also by their families. This further stimulates them to maintain strong relations with their former cellmates. Having gone through similar experiences, they sense that only these women can really understand them. Ahed, for instance, had strong relations with her mother and sister, yet after she had been released, she nevertheless felt closer to her former cellmates and other political prisoners. In her words, "We had shared a life together that was alien to those who did not have those experiences."

How does this all affect marriage? Among families with a history of commitment to the resistance, political affiliation is often an important criterium for selecting a partner. This mattered even more if women themselves had been incarcerated for a longer period of time. Quite a number of couples had married within the same party. This does not, however, mean that the party is actively involved in arranging marriages. "They will support former prisoners in finding employment, but not in finding a spouse, that is private" one of our interlocutors explained. This fits with the general reluctance—also in the case of non-political marriages—to get involved in "matchmaking," as this is considered a heavy responsibility; if the marriage were to fall apart, those involved in arranging it might also be held responsible. Marriages within the party often simply come about because of the conditions of possibility, that is, the ability to meet each other at party-linked social events.

At the same time, the party, but also kin, may try to discourage marriages with men strongly involved in other parties. Ahed's narrative shows how she dealt with such concerns. After she had been released members of her political group vaguely suggested certain men as potential marriage candidates, but nothing came of that. Later, Ahed developed feelings for someone from an Islamic organization. Both her

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family and the party were against the attachment. First, her martyred husband, who had held a leadership position, had insisted that she remarry someone from the same left-wing group as, in his view, only such a person would accept and protect her. Her family was also concerned that she and this man were too different. In her brother's words, "those who are summer people cannot live in winter, and those who are winter people cannot live in summer". While these objections did not immediately put Ahed off, after she had some conversations with the person involved, she came to agree that they were, indeed, too different. Sometime later, a former political prisoner from the same left-wing organization proposed marriage. After seeing her at a prisoners' solidarity event, he had approached her through Facebook, explaining that he knew about her, knew her family, and had known her martyred husband. "He visited my family, four months later we were engaged, and another four months later, we were married," Ahed summarized.

Whereas political parties are hesitant to become involved in arranging marriages, individual women prisoners may attempt to do so for their fellow prisoners. Incarcerated in cells with women from the same political group, close friendships and political affiliation merge to such an extent that a woman may attempt to turn her friend into affinal kin. When we interviewed Ahed, her close friend and former cellmate Zahra was also present. Zahra was from a different village, but her political background was very similar to that of Ahed. Her family also had a long history of involvement with the same political party and her father had been martyred. The two women became very close friends in prison and as a result they faced a very difficult time when one of them was released one year prior to the other. As Zahra recalled, "It was so difficult to leave her [Ahed] in prison by herself. When I was hanging out at university with two other ex-prisoners, we were constantly saying, 'now Ahed will be doing this, now she will be doing that.' We know the prison routine so well." While they were relating these experiences to us, it was obvious how strongly these experiences still affected them. Hugging each other, both women had tears in their eyes.

Ahed, the one who had stayed in prison the longest, then explained to us how she used to say to Zahra, "I want you to be in our family." Ahed did not leave it at this, but started to take steps to put this into practice. First, she tried to marry her friend to one of her nephews, but as it turned out, this nephew was already married by the time Zahra was released. Subsequently, Ahed turned to his imprisoned brother. She sent him a letter in which she included a picture of herself, Zahra, and another woman. He showed an interest in Zahra and asked about her. They then managed to get into contact with each other by telephone and he asked Zahra to wait for him, as he would be released four months later. Zahra agreed to do so. She told her family that someone wanted to marry her but that she needed to wait for his release. When that moment came, she and some friends went to his welcoming party. Six months later he came to ask for her hand. When the couple got officially engaged, they sent

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a message to the radio station to convey the news of their engagement to Ahed who was still in prison. As Ahed said, “I was very, very happy, Zahra is now in our family.”

Yet there is also a more specific way in which political subjectivity is at stake, that is when (previously) incarcerated women decide to marry a fellow prisoner, preferably someone with a long sentence, who stands little chance to be released.[12] In these cases, women do not expect to actually live a marital life, but they intend to actively produce hope in an apparently hopeless situation, both for the prisoner concerned and for the Palestinian resistance at large. It is a form of *sumud* against all odds.

Several of our interlocutors married a prisoner who had been sentenced to life imprisonment. Tahrir claimed that when she married in the mid-1990s she was the first to do so. Her prospective husband had heard about her and had become very impressed, as she had spent a long time in solitary confinement and had organized lots of activities for the younger prisoners. Tahrir herself felt a strong sense of solidarity with prisoners from the 1948 area precisely because they would be excluded from any future prisoners’ exchange. For her “this wasn’t just an engagement and marriage and all of that, it was not simply a personal relationship…” She had been strongly affected by a sense of injustice when she had heard that a Jewish-Israeli prisoner who had been convicted of the 1990 Uyun Qari (Rishon LeZion) massacre, in which seven Palestinian workers were martyred and many wounded, had been allowed to marry in prison. “It made me very angry. We wanted to make a statement, that we also have the right as prisoners to do this. We wanted to create a precedent,” she explained. Still, even with the support of lawyers, it was a long struggle to conclude the marriage contract and to have some kind of wedding. Tahrir had wished for a real wedding and to have conjugal visits, but her husband did not want to push for that. She had wanted this, so that “young prisoners with life sentences would have hope, and would be able to have children”.[13]

Samira, who had experienced the execution of her fiancé and had not been interested in marriage thereafter, changed her mind when she started to think about marrying a prisoner with a life sentence, “in order to give prisoners hope to have families”. After she was released from prison in the early 2000s, she became active, under a pseudonym, in a support group for prisoners. In the course of her work, she got to know a prisoner, who then asked her to contact a certain woman, who had spent time in prison. “He told me he wanted to marry her, not realizing that he was, in fact, speaking with her, he did not know my real name,” Samira said. She then started to ask about him, who he was, about his family, and about his case. One of her incarcerated brothers knew him from prison and through him they were able to communicate. “What mattered most for me were his morals and his willingness to fight,” Samira explained. “I was impressed by his case, he had taken part in a military action that targeted Israeli soldiers. I also asked the advice of my family. Some were in favor—one of my brothers knew him in prison—but my

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oldest brother was against the idea. He was worried that I would regret it later, that he would never be released… But the choice was mine. And I wanted someone who was a fighter, who had sacrificed for his country." When we asked her whether she had seen him and met him in person, she explained, "I had not seen him, that sort of thing does not matter much to me. To enter into such a relation is to take part in the struggle." She also mentioned an additional consideration, foregrounding gender. "I was working with men a lot. And then when you yourself are not in a relation or engaged, that may cause problems, their wives may become jealous…" He then asked for her hand, his family came to visit her family and the couple was engaged "in the traditional way", as she said. She managed to visit him once, using the ID of his sister. Just like with Tahrir, in her case it also took years before they succeeded in having the marriage contract arranged, and by that time she was herself again incarcerated.

Families, as well as individual family members, may hold diverse opinions about whether such a political marriage is desirable. Samira mentioned the different perspectives of her brothers, the one who had himself been in prison for a long time supported the idea, but her eldest brother had warned her against the marriage. In the case of Ahed, she did not find family support. When she had been in prison for some years, she had also expressed her desire to get engaged to someone who had been sentenced to life in order "to give him hope, to give him a connection with life outside of prison". Yet in her case, her family objected to her doing so while she herself was still incarcerated. They wanted her to wait until she had been released. "He has a life sentence, and you will be free in two years. You need to get to know each other, you should think about this, not decide based on emotions. When you are in prison your thinking is restricted," they said. Also her brother who had been a prisoner himself did not support her, but he used a different line of argumentation. "You entered prison as the widow of a martyr; it is difficult to be liberated as a married woman, that is hard for your late husband's family, they also should have some say in this," he said. Ahed then agreed with them. After her release, she managed to find ways to communicate with her prospective husband, but in the course of time came to realize that even if they were from the same political group, they were too different in other respects and a relationship did not develop.

Whereas both Samera's and Ahed's families were not only highly politicized but also well established in their communities, Lama, whose family was far more isolated, talked about marriage in a different, more circumscribed, way. She started explaining that "there had not been an opportunity yet for marriage"; apparently no suitable suitor had approached her family. Then she modified this, saying that there was a prisoner who wanted to marry her, presenting him as the one taking the initiative. They had talked to each other by phone, and her brother supported

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the idea, but her father was against it as this man would be in prison for another ten years.

As evident from the above, family members do not hesitate to point to the problems involved in opting for a political marriage. When we talked to the sister of man with a long prison sentence, she told us about her hesitations about his marriage. A woman who was also incarcerated had started to send him supportive letters because he was one of the longest serving prisoners at the time. When she was released, he told her not to wait for him, but to study and get married, as he had no idea when he would be released. But then he was freed as a result of the Oslo Accords. “She still wanted to marry him,” his sister explained. “I did not support that, I told her, you are still very young… she was 23, and he was thirty years older… I said to her, you will want to do things, you are impressed because he is a hero, the whole world sees him as a hero, but when you are forty, he will be seventy… But she wanted him and they got married.”

As this last case already indicates, it was not necessarily the political aspect of the marriage that family members may object to, but the fact that these marriages bring together two individuals (or families) that are very different in other ways, such as in terms of age, class or religion. This is also what Manal experienced. She had been raised in an urban environment where education was much valued, had become involved with a leftist organization, and became active in the military resistance in the later 1970s. After spending eight years in prison, she was released in a prisoner exchange. At first, she did not consider marriage. But when she became involved in a prisoner support group, she met an ex-prisoner from the same organization, whom she described as “a democratic and very respectable man, who supported the women’s cause not only in words but also in practice”. They got engaged, but the problem was that he was Muslim and she was Christian and her family refused to agree to the marriage. However, the couple found a priest who was willing to marry them, and they registered the marriage with the sharia court. “Each of us kept the own religion,” she said. “We celebrate all the feasts, but we are leftist and not very religious.” The rift with her family lasted for two years. “With the intifada we became fugitives, we were on the wanted list. Our friends went to my father… and then he came and my mother and sisters also, because they were worried about me. And my husband also made it easy for them.” But in other cases relations remained strained, as another of our interlocutors, who had become active in the military resistance at about the same time, explained. Her Christian family, refugees living in a village, abandoned her when she decided to marry a Muslim, a fellow prisoner from the same group she had been active in. Because of this marriage, her family had become ostracized, with villagers throwing stones at their house. Their life became unbearable, and they felt forced to leave the country and to move abroad.

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Separation: signification and sacrifice

Engagements and marriages did not always last after women were incarcerated. The norm that women are to put their lives on hold while their husbands are in prison is a strongly gendered norm; when the woman is the one in prison, there is less pressure on men to wait for her release. Our interlocutors also mentioned that some men break off the engagement or marriage if their partner is incarcerated, or occasionally, marry a second wife. But we also talked with previously incarcerated women whose husbands had remained supportive or who had themselves initiated a separation.

Focusing on how separations come about and how these are signified by the parties concerned, the situation may well turn out to be more complex than it may seem at first glance. In some cases, families put pressure on either the woman or the man to break off the relationship. But prisoners may also initiate a separation themselves as an act of sacrifice to avoid keeping the life of one's partner on hold. Both aspects are present in Tahrir's narrative. Her fiancée was imprisoned and sentenced to life before they had been able to conclude the marriage contract and plan for the wedding. Two years after he had entered prison, her eldest brother—her father had passed away—and other family members began pressuring her to break the engagement. "They said, there is no marriage contract yet and you do not have a child… you never know what will happen, maybe he will leave you and marry someone else. If you break off the engagement you are free, you can choose to wait for him or not to do so, that is up to you." At first, she refused the idea, but then she changed her mind. "He [her brother] convinced me that it was not something emotional, but rational. And he promised that he would not pressure me to marry someone else."

Then Tahrir herself was detained. When her former fiancée was unexpectedly released, she was still in prison. He wanted to take her in marriage, but she did not agree, because she expected to remain incarcerated for a long time. "I said, I do not want you to wait for me, you still have a life in front of you, you have the right to marry and have children. So in the end he married someone else, and I was happy about that." Sometime later Tahrir decided to marry a man with a life sentence. When she, in turn, was released as part of the Oslo Accords, her husband divorced her for the very same reason. "He did so that I would be able to marry someone else and to have children," she explained. She did indeed remarry, to a man with similar political convictions, who had been in prison for more than a decade, and they had a child. When she was incarcerated again, her husband waited for her. Tahrir underlined how meaningful this was, as women prisoners with children often face the strongest societal criticism.[14]

Allowing the other party "to get on with their life, to marry and have children" was an almost formulaic argument we heard time and again from incarcerated women when engagements were broken and marriages came to an end. Whereas it

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is often assumed otherwise, it is not necessarily the case that the man is the one who takes the initiative. As the above indicates, especially when women face a long prison term, they themselves may well release their partners from their commitment.

Still, some incarcerated women felt left down by their spouses. Palestinian media regularly show welcoming parties for prisoners, also celebrating their wives who have patiently waited for more than a decade for their partner's release (Shwaikh 2022, 511). Less publicly visible are the nightmare scenarios some families present to their female kin to convince them to divorce their imprisoned husbands. They warn them that they will spend their life waiting for their husbands' release, only to find out that once released these men will opt to marry a younger woman with whom they can start a new family.

Even women who have opted for a political marriage with someone with a life sentence may in the end be disappointed. Samira who had entered such a marriage told us that the relationship had worked well for more than a decade. But when she herself was then again imprisoned she felt something had changed. After her release, some years later, her husband did not try to contact her. He then raised the issue that he wanted children and suggested trying sperm smuggling. Samira agreed, but he never made an attempt to do so. In hindsight, she suspects that he may have expected her to refuse, which would have given him a socially acceptable reason for a divorce. When he kept insisting on a separation, Samira's brother intervened and asked him for his reasons. He then complained that Samira had not obeyed him, as he had asked her not to go back to prison, and also said that he wanted a younger wife. Explaining how her brother had supported her, Samira recounted, "My brother told him, you knew her before this marriage and you knew what she is like, that she is an activist, a fighter. You got engaged to her while she was in prison, so how can you do this, you knew she may be arrested again." Samira on her part suspected that something else was at stake, that her husband was unhappy that she refused to engage in more intimate conversations by telephone. In her view, there was a decline of men's morale in prison, especially with the future looking increasingly bleak. He also wanted her to initiate the divorce and give up her financial rights. At first, she refused, but two years later, tired of it all, she sent back what she had received from his family and they were officially divorced.

Samira's narrative indicates the multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways in which incarceration, kinship, and marriage impact upon one another. Her experience with colonial power and incarceration led her to marry a life-sentenced prisoner, an act about which her brothers held divergent views. More than a decade into the marriage, her husband then wanted a divorce because she had been imprisoned again. Hers was not the only case in which a partner did not condone his wife's activism. Ahed's husband had always objected to her engaging in acts of resistance, because he wanted her to support his mother. Such a reluctance of

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having close relations engage in the resistance became more widespread when the political climate became increasingly desperate and social support for prisoners further diminished. Some of our interlocutors related how even in families that had a history of political activism, mothers and other kin may try to discourage their children from becoming engaged in the resistance.

Conclusion

In the above we have presented some insights that emerged from our interlocutors' narratives about how the boundaries between political activism and intimate relations are reproduced, transgressed, or transformed and how gender matters. Whereas our interlocutors push back when their interrogators attempt to politicize intimate relations, trying to exert pressure through kin and partners, politicization takes on a very different meaning when they discuss their own marriages.

As incarceration has often resulted in strengthening their political subjectivity, our interlocutors often underlined that they themselves were actively involved in politicizing marriage. For them, opting for a spouse who is committed to the resistance may well override other forms of closeness, turning some of their marriages into acts of transgressing the boundaries of class or religion. Some have engaged in a highly specific form of "political marriage," that is a marriage with someone who stands very little chance of ever being released from prison, explicitly referring to the affective realm of giving hope, connecting the prisoner to a new family. In those cases, incarceration contributes to the production of dense politico-kin networks through political marriages. Yet, in some cases such marriages may also sever kinship ties. When families consider a marriage too transgressive, this may cause a rift between the incarcerated woman and her family. In addition, there are not only differences between families, but families themselves are not unitary; some family members may be in favor of a particular marriage, while others may oppose it. Entering into such a marriage may then reconfigure kin relations, by mobilizing certain kin relations and disregarding others.

Engaging with the broader question of how family matters, it is evident that family histories of resistance, sometimes stretching over generations, provide an environment of national fervor and sometimes affiliation to a particular political organization. Women's experiences with close kin, fiancés, or husbands incarcerated or martyred may encourage them to become active in the resistance themselves. Still, these experiences do not determine how they will act; their agentic power matters. Incarcerated women often have close kin, such as sisters, who did not become politically involved, and most wives of incarcerated men do not become politically active to the extent that they are incarcerated themselves.

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In some cases, kin as well as partners who are themselves highly politicized may discourage or even prohibit their female kin and wives from becoming similarly involved in political action.

In this contribution we have stayed very close to the insights we have gained through ethnography, in particular the topical life stories previously incarcerated women presented about the relation between incarceration, marriage, and separation. This has enabled us to gain insight into the diverse positions of our interlocutors, their kin, and their partners. They do not only differ among themselves about how they relate the political and the intimate, but individual women also take up diverse positions depending on the particular relational context they are operating in. Still, it is evident that marriage does not only or primarily reproduce the family in the sense of maintaining or continuing existing relations. It may also be transformative, activating particular kin relationships and disregarding other relationships, and produce new political communities of resistance.

Notes

1 In order to protect the privacy of our interlocutors, the names used are pseudonyms.

2 Addameer, a prisoners and human rights organization, publishes extensively on Palestinian political prisoners, including reports on the experiences of women prisoners; see Francis (2017) and https://www.addameer.org/the_prisoners/women Last accessed April 20, 2023.

3 Women had, for instance, a greater presence in the first intifada, which was characterized by widespread popular non-violent resistance, than in the second intifada, which was stronger militarized (Johnson and Kuttab 2001).

4 This was already the case in the 1970s and 1980s. In the late 1990s all women prisoners (about thirty) were to be released as part of the 1995 Oslo Accords, although it took until early 1997 before this had materialized (Addameer 2009, 34 and 36; see also Shwaikh 2022, 514). Since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, Israel has arrested more than 700 Palestinian women. Two years before the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange in 2011 all twenty Palestinian women at the time in Israeli prisons were released in exchange for a video-clip that showed that Shalit was still alive. According to Addameer, in 2018 the number of Palestinian women in Israeli prisons varied from 52 to 65.

5 Longer term imprisonment is a valid shari' ground for a woman to ask the judge to dissolve her marriage.

6 Abdo (2011) has focused on the experiences of mainly left-wing well-educated women prisoners in the 1970s and 1980s on the West Bank, Bayour (2004) has done extensive research with former women political prisoners from Gaza, Meari (2014) has analyzed how Palestinian women resist threats and torture during interrogation, and Shwaikh (2022) has interviewed former incarcerated women hunger strikers.

7 For the extensive literature on *sumud* see, for example, Bourbeau and Ryan (2018), Keelan and Browne (2020) and especially Meari (2014, 2015). Whereas *sumud* may be seen as in some ways similar to resilience it is in no way connected to how neo-liberalism celebrates resilience. Instead, it is better seen as a particular subjectivity that enables resistance. Shwaikh (2022, 523), writing on hunger strikes, presents a critical perspective on *sumud*.

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[8] This is not an entirely new development. Hasso (2000, 492) has analyzed how nationalist activists, aware that concerns about the honor of female kin had pushed people to flee their homes in 1948, have attempted to link honor to protecting the land rather than to women's sexuality as evident in the slogan *al-ard qabl al ʻird* (land before honor).

[9] For reasons of accessibility, our research is limited to ex-political prisoners living on the West Bank.

[10] Also, next to politically organized women, young girls involved in spontaneous violent action have also entered the Israeli prison system.

[11] Some authors do write about very serious cases of sexual violence, including rape. See, for instance, Abdo (2008) and Aysha Odeh's autobiography (2004).

[12] This includes men with Israeli citizenship as releasing them in prisoner exchanges is a red line for the Israeli government.

[13] Up until now (2022) the Israeli prison authorities do not allow conjugal visits for Palestinian security prisoners. However, by the early 2010s Palestinian prisoners had developed an alternative, that is smuggling sperm out of prison, so their wives would get pregnant through in vitro fertilization (IVF) and the couple would have children.

[14] These women faced very harsh circumstances while in prison. Women who were pregnant gave birth in prison, under extremely difficult circumstances, shackled hand and foot. Those with very small children could keep them with them in prison until they reached the age of two; both their time in prison and the subsequent separation were emotionally very taxing for the mother as well as for the child.

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