

NEOLIBERAL VISIONS?

EXPLORING GENDERED MEDIA
AND POPULAR CULTURE IN THE
PALESTINIAN WEST BANK

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Neoliberal Visions? Exploring Gendered Media and Popular Culture in the Palestinian West Bank

Polly Withers, Rema Hammami, Rania Jawad and Amirah Silmi

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Abstract

Walking through Ramallah, it is hard not to notice the commercial advertising billboards, TV screens, and posters that line the city's streets. They frequently feature bright glossy images of young nuclear families – always a man and a woman, often with light skin – gazing longingly at 'dream' homes. These materials document how capital and aspiration are increasingly enfolded into everyday space in post-Oslo Palestine. They particularly show how neoliberal 'reforms' have transformed Palestine's political economy over (at least) the past 30 years. Indeed, Ramallah today embodies the complexities wrought by the Oslo process more than any other space in Palestine: its inhabitants paradoxically live under a colonial present shaped by neoliberal capitalism. While recent works consider how such shifts reformulate the political economy of occupied Palestine, and/or reroute the struggle for national liberation, rarely are the cultural practices and media forms that mark, embody and communicate such political and economic changes centralised as sites of meaning-making. Even less forthcoming is work that explores how such representations cultivate shifts in gender and sexuality norms. This project offers a different interpretation of the West Bank's neoliberal order that moves beyond these traditional theoretical straightjackets. Using textual and qualitative methods, it foregrounds both the production and consumption of gendered advertisements as a way to explore how neoliberal culture constructs gendered subjectivity. It broadly asks how transforming forms of political economy, social relations and cultural practices relate to changing modes of gendered subjectivity in contemporary Palestine.

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Introduction

Polly Withers

Walking through Ramallah, the unofficial capital of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, it is difficult to ignore the commercial billboards, digital screens and advertisements that scramble to dominate the city's skyline. Some feature bright, glossy images of young, nuclear families – always a man and a woman, often with light skin – gazing longingly at dream homes. Others deploy historic symbols of the Palestinian nation to market bank loans for cars and luxury weddings to imagined future clients. Several recycle hyper-gendered and orientalist visions of the 'exotic' Middle East as they promote their wares to local audiences and regional investors. Together, such representations document how capital, aspiration and enterprise culture are increasingly enfolded into everyday life in colonised Palestine. They show how neoliberal reforms have transformed Palestine's political economy over at least the past 30 years. Indeed, Ramallah today embodies the complexities wrought by the 1993 Oslo Accords more than any other space in Palestine: its inhabitants paradoxically live under a colonial present shaped by neoliberal capitalism.



Advertisement for a housing loan (al-qard al-sakney) from the Arab Bank in the West Bank. Fronting productive aspiration, the central caption reads: 'I hoped [wished for]' (tamaniyet), which is crossed out, and replaced with 'I owned/possessed' (tamaliket) (photo taken in Ramallah by Polly Withers, 19/01/2017).

This project foregrounds these quotidian media shifts in the West Bank's everyday urban publics as a point of departure. Taking neoliberal globalisation, Palestinian statelessness and Israeli settler-colonisation as the political economic contexts, it examines the production, distribution and reception of: (i) differently gendered media such as banking efforts

to 'empower' women through finance, and (ii) cultural practices through theatre production and participation under donor funding to 'tackle' domestic abuse, to explore how far neoliberal norms and mores reshape gendered subjectivities in current-day Palestine.

Curiously, and despite the mushrooming of consumer culture and class-drawn lifestyles in the West Bank, there has to date been very little systematic study of the gendered, cultural and psychic life of neoliberalism in current-day Palestine. Moreover, and as discussed in greater depth below, given Israeli settler-colonialism, researchers tend to examine neoliberal shifts through the lens of political economy under occupation.¹ Thus, we know much about the ways in which media systems enact, mediate and/or negotiate popular, post and/or neoliberal feminisms and femininities in the advanced capitalist societies of the Global North.² However, we are much less equipped to trace how such flexible and migratory formations travel to, and are variously hybridised in, the contemporary Middle East and North Africa (MENA).³

Instead, gender has been most extensively theorised in the literature on Palestine in relation to Israel's heteropatriarchal settler project and the anti-colonial nationalisms it engenders. Feminist scholars have highlighted that because Israeli settler-colonialism mobilises heteropatriarchal frames to (re)produce its racialised domination in Palestine, classic anti-colonial nationalisms often root highly regulatory gender and sexuality scripts into their discursive scaffolds.⁴ Within this narrative schema, men die protecting the homeland, while women reproduce it biologically and culturally via child-rearing.⁵ National liberation is thus dependent on heterosexual sex acts, suturing both gender binaries and heteronormative desire into disciplinary national subjectivities. This work thus allows us to identify interactions between gender norms, national discourse and settler-colonial experiences in Palestine. However, because it does not engage with neoliberalism's a/effects, it needs expanding if it is to be useful for theorising how, if indeed at all, late-modern globalisation is reorientating subjectivities, and/or fostering novel social and cultural formations, in the contemporary Palestinian moment.

¹ See Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour, 'Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XI/2 (2011), pp. 6–25; Toufic Haddad, *Palestine Ltd.: Neoliberalism and Nationalism in the Occupied Territory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

² Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018); Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/2 (2007), pp. 147–66; Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (London: Sage Publications, 2009); Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ cf. Aihwa Ong, 'Neoliberalism as a Mobile Technology', *Boundary Crossing* 32/1 (2007), pp. 3–8; Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, Or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

⁴ Walaa Alqaisiya, 'Decolonial Queering: The Politics of Being Queer in Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 3 (2018), pp. 29–44; Joseph Massad, 'Conceiving the Masculine: Gender and Palestinian Nationalism', *The Middle East Journal* 49/3 (1995), pp. 467–83; Rema Hammami, 'Women, the Hijab and the Intifada', *Middle East Report* (1990); Julie Peteet, 'Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian Intifada: A Cultural Politics of Violence', *American Ethnologist* 21 (1994), pp. 31–49; Penny Johnson & Eileen Kuttub, 'Where have all the Women (and Men) Gone?' *Feminist Review* 69 (2002), pp. 21–43.

⁵ Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Rhoda Kanaaneh, *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

This project is orientated around these gaps. Over a 24-month period from 2019 to 2021, and in the unfortunate shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team engaged in several interconnected exploratory streams: banking, cultural production in the theatre and telecommunications advertising. Collectively (and as lockdown restrictions allowed), we produced 40 qualitative, semi-structured and feminist-directed interviews with different media-makers (e.g. media content producers), participants (e.g. theatre actors) and audience-members (e.g. recipients of training programmes; advert users/viewers) in the West Bank. We also augmented this qualitative data with thematic, audio-visual analysis of over 100 media texts and images related to our three sub-fields.

Overall, the findings from our data highlight how contemporary media and cultural ecosystems institutionalise depoliticised yet fractured ideas about gendered ‘empowerment’ across Palestinian quotidian. Our results emphasise both the stretch of, and the limits with, neoliberal shaping practices in Palestine, allowing us to draw two core conclusions. First, that globalised neoliberal norms certainly do promote idealised personhoods, centred on hyper-individuality, self-maximisation and resilience, through media and cultural production as the literature might suggest. Second, however, such normativities are neither totalising nor do they operate in vacuums. Globalised identity codes always enter living social arrangements, replete with pre-existing gendered imaginaries and cultural systems of administration. Such ongoing social and political lifeworlds therefore intermingle with neoliberal values to form complex political subjectivities split across competing regimes of subjection.

We arrive at this point of close through a variety of interlinked steps. First, I (Polly Withers) briefly review some of the key debates in feminist media studies on the ways that neoliberal shifts transform gender and sexuality in the twenty-first century under advanced capitalism. I argue that feminist media, culture and communications routinely overlook Palestine and MENA. I therefore highlight that a major contribution of this study is its insistence on problematising feminist media studies in, of, and from the region. Second, Rema Hammami theorises neoliberalism from Palestine. She sketches the typical political economy lenses through which analysts approach neoliberal globalisation in the Palestinian context, emphasising the need to use gendered sociological lenses to deepen such content. Third, we present two case studies. In the first, Rania Jawad examines how theatre actors negotiate donor demands to engage content around domestic violence. In donor-circuits, this is always already rendered as ‘gender-based violence’, implying that such actions are inherent to certain regions of the world and not others. Her argument is that imperial patronage formulates the actor as a development worker; a position that the participants with whom Jawad worked with, flexibly inhabit. In the second study, Amirah Silmi uses the case of the *Felestinyeya* (Palestinian woman) banking project to consider how the Bank of Palestine appropriates ideas about women’s empowerment to deepen its, as well as the wider banking system’s, role in contemporary Palestinian society. Despite mobilising (neo)liberal feminist concepts about gendered inclusion in arenas from which women have historically been excluded, Silmi highlights that such projects in fact reinforce patriarchal power relations and related gendered stereotypes in the social order. Finally, I conclude the study and summarise its core contributions to Middle East Studies, gender studies and feminist media, culture and communication studies.

Gender & Sexuality under Neoliberal Capitalism: A (Brief) Feminist Media Studies Overview

Polly Withers

Feminist research in media, culture and communications prolifically theorises how neoliberal frames reshape ideas about gender and sexuality in the advanced capitalist societies of the Global North. Taking late modern capitalism and neoliberal hegemony as the political economic contexts, this scholarship employs popular culture to illustrate how contemporary media practices enact, mediate and/or reformulate masculinities, femininities and sexualities in the twenty-first century. Producing the highly generative concepts of popular, post- and neoliberal feminisms, this work traces how advanced capitalism depoliticises historic repertoires of feminist organising, while further introducing disciplinary technologies for individuating and subsequently policing - mainly feminised - bodies and desires in neoliberal contexts.⁶

Accordingly, Sarah Banet-Weiser's 'popular feminism' argues that the media cultures that dominate advanced capitalist societies render feminism ubiquitous – trendy even – across widespread media ecosystems. In achieving visibility, however, the feminisms on offer necessarily undergo a process of radical depoliticisation. Those with the greatest luminosity on digital platforms promote the neoliberal maxims of atomised choice-making, empowerment and consumer agency as remedy for structural injury. Often used to sell commercial items and associated lifestyles within the capitalist market, such safely affirmative feminist sensibilities reduce political identifications to hyper-individual performances of personality (wearing a t-shirt with a feminist slogan, for instance, or being a 'girl boss' at work). Within this mediated environment, ghostly feminist apparitions appear everywhere yet manifest without substance – shifting feminist mediation from a politics to an economy of visibility. 'Popular feminism', then, takes shape in consumer culture as depoliticised spectacle geared toward profit maximisation and subject-pacification, rather than systemic change. Thus, unravelling the core tenants of structurally transformative, justice-based feminist mobilisation.

Relatedly, Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie's research on 'postfeminism' examines how, in contexts where neoliberal ideas penetrate deeply into a society's institutional frameworks, commercial media and popular cultures often push that women no longer need feminism, because its (liberal) aims have (apparently) been realised; women have careers, education, private property rights, some access to reproductive health, childcare.⁷ This repudiation of feminism therefore engenders a sociohistorical context in which systemic patriarchal violences (discursive and material) operate unabated, yet women – the for-profit media informs its audiences – are more liberated than ever before. 'Postfeminist' common sense thus accounts for, yet disavows, the need for feminism.⁸ This depoliticises the social ills that patriarchy ravages on women (and men), rendering the individual

⁶ Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*; Gill, 'Postfeminist media culture'; McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*; Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*.

⁷ Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture'; McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

privately responsible for its a/effects. For Gill then, ‘postfeminism’ cultivates a gendered neoliberal sensibility based on acquiring the individual dispositions (positive mental attitude, confidence, personal resilience) required to affectively survive in such structurally dysfunctional, neoliberal times.⁹

The final concept in this triad is Catherine Rottenberg’s ‘neoliberal feminism’.¹⁰ Focused on the US context, her thesis examines uncanny alliances between the corporate world and feminist vocabularies. Rottenberg argues that, under neoliberalism, we witness shifts from a liberal feminist focus on (some, mainly white, heterosexual and middle class) women’s equality in the workplace and/or liberation at home, toward an aggressive, leadership-style feminism orientated around enhancing racially, sexually and class-privileged women’s standing in unequal, monetarily-driven societies. This hyper-individualised femininity therefore mobilises feminist language to, ultimately, reproduce capital-generated splits between worthy (capital enhancing) female subjects and unworthy (disposable domestic care workers) others. As a cultural formation, this pits women against other women. Mobilising the language of empowerment encourages some women to lean in to leadership, while further excluding others from the elite echelons of society such a socio-economic order creates. Overlapping with ‘popular’ and ‘postfeminism’, then, ‘neoliberal’ feminism casts out the struggle to undo unjust gendered distributions of labour, and perpetuates racial, heteronormative and classed hierarchies.

Despite its widespread influence across Euro-American cultural theory, such conceptualisations are surprisingly absent from discussions of gender, sexuality and the media under neoliberal capitalism in the Global South. MENA is particularly overlooked and under-theorised. This is interesting because it appears to assume, tacitly at least, that globalised capitalist space-time, and its associated classed and gendered divisions of labour, somehow do not penetrate the region’s socioeconomic order. As Simidele Dosekun demonstrates in her work on Gill’s ‘postfeminist’ media cultures in Nigeria, however, the ‘non-West’ is not, and never has been, disconnected from the globalised networks of capitalist production, accumulation and subjection that elsewhere facilitate defanged gender/sexual politics.¹¹ Thinking with our discipline’s silences, then, Dosekun argues that Global North media studies blanketly frames ‘global girls’ as victims of homogenised ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’. Ignoring how class intersects with gender in the Global South, Dosekun highlights that the field overlooks Global South girls’ differential subject positions internal to their specific contexts. Indeed, many critical gender and development communications scholars have pointed to the ways that aid industries deploy this ‘global girl’ to sustain geopolitical power relations.¹² This work tells us much about the ways that ‘Western’

⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill & Catherine Rottenberg, ‘Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism’, *Feminist Theory* 21/1 (2020), pp. 3–24.

¹⁰ Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*.

¹¹ Simidele Dosekun, *Spectacular Femininity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

¹² E.g. Mimi Thi Nguyen, ‘The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in the Age of Terror’, *Signs* 362 (2011), pp. 359–83; Heather Switzer, ‘(Post)feminist Development Fables: The Girl Effect and the Production of Sexual Subjects’, *Feminist Theory* 14/3 (2013), pp. 345–60; Loubna Skalli, ‘The Girl Factor and the (In)Security of Coloniality: A View from the Middle East’, *Alternative: Global, Local, Political* 40/2 (2015), pp. 174–87.

donors construct Global North girls as the ‘empowered saviours’ of their ‘down-trodden’ Global South ‘sisters’. However, while highlighting gendered north-south hierarchies, this research is less forthcoming about instances in which rescuer-rescued dynamics are located within societies of the Global South.

It is here that feminist research in Middle East and gender studies can help tie the existing media studies literature more closely to the Palestinian context. As feminist scholars working on the region highlight, a key impact of neoliberalism on feminist politics has been its reorientation of collective feminist action away from the grassroots, and towards the individuated world of NGO boardrooms and international conferences.¹³ Described as the NGOisation of Arab women’s movements, this body of work argues that neoliberal shifts have narrowed the contours of access to women’s political action, mainly through class hierarchies.¹⁴ When donor funding flooded into the West Bank after Oslo, it created a number of jobs in NGOs focused on women’s rights.¹⁵ Given the requirements for fluency in English, as well as other skills such as grant writing, these positions tended to go to educated, middle-class and urban professional women. The impact, as this body of research shows, was the creation of a transnationally orientated cadre of elite career feminists, operating on the international rather than local or grassroots levels. Not only did this significantly reshape legitimate spheres of feminist activity in the West Bank, it also intensified class-based divisions between women within Palestinian society. Here, then, we see how the rescuer/rescued dynamics that the feminist media literatures generally maps through north/south contours manifest internally, among women in Palestine. Bringing this Middle East-focused scholarship to bear on feminist cultural studies therefore offers a bedrock for further work on the ways that local class dynamics shape the nature, scope and cultural negotiation of feminist mediation in the region.

Overall, then, this paper examines the extent to which neoliberal globalisation (re)shapes gender, class and sexual subjectivities, through consumer media and cultural labour, in the Palestinian context. Orientated around disciplinary gaps in feminist media theory, it builds on, and contributes to, gender-focused debates in global communications about consumer cultures in the Global South.¹⁶ Drawing on critical work in media globalisation,

¹³ Eileen Kuttab, ‘The Palestinian Women’s Movement: From Resistance and Liberation to Accommodation and Globalization’, *Vents d’Est, Vents d’Ouest: Mouvements de Femmes et Féminismes Anticoloniaux* (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2009), pp. 101–16; Victoria Bernal & Inderpal Grewal (eds.), *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Islah Jad, ‘The NGOisation of the Arab Women’s Movements’, *Al-Raida Journal* 2 (2004), pp. 42–56.

¹⁵ Rema Hammami, ‘NGOs: the Professionalisation of Politics’, *Race & Class* 37/2 (1995), pp. 51–63; Rema Hammami, ‘Palestinian NGOs Since Oslo: From NGO Politics to Social Movements?’, *MERIP* 241 (2002), pp. 16–19, 27, 48.

¹⁶ E.g. Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* (London: Duke University Press, 1999); Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005); Ritty Lukose, *Liberalization’s Children* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Rachel Heiman, Carla Freeman, & Mark Liechty, *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing through Ethnography* (Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, 2012); Carla Freeman, *Entrepreneurial Selves* (London: Duke University Press, 2014); Mehita Iqani, *Consumption, Media and the Global South: Aspiration Contested* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Mehita Iqani & Simidele Dosekun, S. (eds), *African Luxury: Aesthetics and Politics* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2019).

it rejects simplistic framings of Levantine neoliberalisations as top-down, homogenised, or totalising ‘Western’ imperialisms.¹⁷ Instead, it traces how contemporary media ecologies draw boundaries and belongings above and below local, national and regional borders through capital. A major contribution of the study thus lies in its problematisation of feminist cultural and communications theory on neoliberal globalisation in/of the case of Palestine. We therefore need to understand the history, scope and limits of the neoliberal paradigm in the Palestinian context: an analytic to which we now turn.

Neoliberalism in Palestine

Rema Hammami

The rise of the neoliberal analytic to analyse Palestinian life under Israeli occupation emerged following the momentous shifts in the Palestinian Authority’s modes and discourses of governance that marked the end of the Second Palestinian Intifada. The political economy lens of much of this work continues to dominate the analyses of neoliberal processes in Palestine, but with much greater emphasis on its political versus economic rationales.¹⁸ A small parallel literature focuses on the embedding of neoliberalism within Israel’s systems of colonial control and expansion, including the settler planning regime and technologies of surveillance and mobility control.¹⁹ Finally, only a handful of studies focus on social and cultural dimensions of neoliberalism in the Palestinian context or address the emergence of neoliberal subjectivities.²⁰

¹⁷ E.g. Raka Shome & Radha Hedge ‘Culture, Communication, and the Challenge of Globalisation’, *Critical Studies in Media and Communication*, 19/2 (2002), pp. 172–89; Kraidy, *Hybridity*; Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Purnima Mankekar ‘Media and Mobility in a Transnational World’ in Hesmondhalgh, D. & Toynbee, J. (eds), *The Media and Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 145–58.

¹⁸ Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour, ‘Neoliberalism and the Contradictions of the Palestinian Authority’s State-building Programme’, in Mandy Turner & Omar Shweiki (eds), *Decolonizing Palestinian Political Economy: De-Development and Beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 179–99; Mandy Turner, ‘Completing the Circle: Peacebuilding as Colonial Practice in the Occupied Palestinian Territory’, *International Peacekeeping*, 19/5 (2012), pp. 492–507; Turner & Shweiki (eds), *Decolonizing Palestinian Political Economy*; Jeremy Wilderman, ‘Neoliberalism as Aid For the Settler Colonization of the Occupied Palestinian Territories after Oslo’, in Alaa Tartir & Timothy Seidel (eds), *Palestine and Rule of Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 153–74; Haddad, *Palestine Ltd*; Tariq Dana, ‘The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society: Key Paradigm Shifts’, *Middle East Critique* 24/2 (2015), pp. 191–210; Tariq Dana, ‘Localising the Economy as a Resistance Response: A Contribution to the “Resistance Economy” Debate in the Occupied Palestinian Territories’, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 15/2 (2020), pp. 192–204; Alaa Tartir ‘Contentious Economics in Occupied Palestine’ in Fawaz Gerges (ed.), *Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 469–99; Alaa Tartir, ‘Securitized Development and Palestinian Authoritarianism under Fayyadism’, *Conflict, Security & Development* 15/5 (2015), pp. 479–502; Linda Tabar & Omar Salamanca, ‘After Oslo: Settler Colonialism, Neoliberal Development and Liberation’ in *Critical Readings of Development under Colonialism* (2015), pp. 9–32; Kareem Rabie, *Palestine Is Throwing a Party and the Whole World Is Invited* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ Andy Clarno, ‘Neoliberal Colonization in the West Bank’, *Social Problems* 65/3 (2018), pp. 323–41; Haim Yacobi and Erez Tzfadia, ‘Neo-Settler Colonialism and the Re-Formation of Territory: Privatization and Nationalization in Israel’, *Mediterranean Politics* 24/1 (2019), pp. 1–19; Irus Braverman, ‘Civilized Borders: A Study of Israel’s New Crossing Administration’, *Antipode* 43/2 (2011), pp. 264–95.

²⁰ Polly Withers, ‘Ramallah Ravers and Haifa Hipsters: Gender, Class, and Nation in Palestinian Popular

Neoliberal Palestine: A Very Political Economy Approach²¹

The rise of ‘Fayyadism’ and the ‘West Bank First Project’ in which the post-Second Intifada leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) adopted neoliberal policy, is the specific context that gave rise to neoliberalism as an object of analysis. Following the near collapse of the PA under Israeli counter-insurgency measures in the Second Intifada, the US and other geostrategic players undertook a series of interventions to re-instate the governing role of the PA, given it was a lynchpin institution for the revival of the Oslo Peace Process. A critical node in the Process was the 2007 creation of a new position of Palestinian Prime Minister, seemingly tailor-made for former International Monetary Fund economist, Salam Fayyad, who went on to articulate a number of PA economic and other policy reforms that embodied central tenets of neoliberal ideology. Rather than justifying these initiatives in purely economic terms (promoting economic growth and betterment), Fayyad posed them as a central component of a wider political strategy through which Palestinians could attain international recognition and legitimacy. Thus, ending the Israeli occupation and ushering in Palestinian independence through diplomatic means. The overall logic of this strategy (dubbed the ‘West Bank First Project’) and codified into the 2008 PA Reform and Development Plan, was that Palestinian independence and liberation could be secured through good behaviour, specifically of the Palestinian Authority behaving according to the norms of neoliberal good governance set down by the post-Washington Consensus.

Given the high visibility of neoliberal discourse in this crucial turning point in the Palestinian liberation project and what remained of its historic leadership, there is a strong consensus in the dominant literature that Fayyadism is the pivotal context in which neoliberalism made its entry into Palestinian governance and economic life, becoming fostered as ideology by the Palestinian Authority. The now dominant frame for analysing neoliberalism in Palestine remains focused on the main players of this transition (the PA, international donors and key Palestinian capitalists), reading the rise of neoliberalism primarily through policy documents and legal instruments. Though largely assuming a political economy approach, the majority emphasise political rather than economic rationales in their analysis.²² This is due to the obvious discursive link Fayyadism made between neoliberal policy and the geopolitics of state-building as national liberation, but is also an outcome of the dearth of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ on the ground.²³

Culture’, *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 48/1 (2021), pp. 94–113; Laura Junka-Aikio, ‘Late Modern Subjects of Colonial Occupation: Mobile Phones and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Palestine’, *New Formations* 75/75 (2012), pp. 99–121; Noemi Casati, ‘Political Participation in a Palestinian University: Nablus Undergraduates’ Political Subjectivities through Boredom, Fear and Consumption’, *Ethnography* 17/4 (2016), pp. 518–38; Chris Harker, *Spacing Debt: Obligations, Violence, and Endurance in Ramallah, Palestine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

²¹ In reference to Rex Brynen’s insight that the Palestinian economy is more political than economic. See Rex Brynen, *A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank and Gaza* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000).

²² See Tariq Dana, ‘The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society: Key Paradigm Shift’, *Middle East Critique*, 24/2 (2015); Linda Tabar and Omar Jabary Salamanca, *After Oslo: Settler Colonialism, Neoliberal Development and Liberation* (2015); Alaa Tartir, ‘Contentious Economics in Occupied Palestine’; Alaa Tartir, ‘Securitized Development and Palestinian Authoritarianism under Fayyadism’, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 15/5 (2015).

²³ Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner, & Nik Theodore, ‘Actually Existing Neoliberalism’, in Damien Carhill et al. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London: Sage Publications, 2018), pp. 3–15.

The founding work for this particular scholarship on neoliberalism in Palestine is Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour's 2011 article that set many of the analytic parameters of this trend.²⁴ Through analysing the main policy document of the first Fayyad government, the 2009 National Development and Reform plan, they posed the geopolitical shepherds of the Peace Process/donor policies as central players in the PA's neoliberal turn; ultimately focusing on the wider political implications of linking a national liberation strategy to the neoliberal logics of the post-Washington Consensus. However, as economists, they were the first to point out the glaring absence of the PA's hold over the main instruments for implementing economic neoliberalism (markets, borders, currency rates etc.) due to Israel's ongoing macro-control of the economy. This issue was taken up by Toufic Haddad, whose 2016 book strove instead to analyse how Fayyadism played a wider geopolitical security function enabling the reproduction of global and regional neoliberal capitalism, rather than having practical salience in Palestinian economic life. In this more nuanced reading, the PA's neoliberalism, though primarily rhetorical, played a central geopolitical function of enabling the US and its allies to prop up a 'moderate', more pliable, Palestinian leadership, that could serve to integrate Israel economically and otherwise into the wider region.²⁵ Mandy Turner's analysis parallels this view but focuses on the perspective of neoliberalism's embeddedness within donor sponsored state-building paradigms that she argues mimic main tenets of 'winning hearts and minds' of local populations according to contemporary anti-insurgency prescriptions.²⁶

Totalising Frames

These main authors within the political economy approach thus focus primarily on the geopolitical dimension of the PA's turn to neoliberalism, and ultimately share the view that its main aims are political pacification and containment of the Palestinian leadership and resistance more generally. Other authors take up the 'pacification/containment' thesis, but shift it into an internal frame to explain broad ideological and structural transformations and their effects on Palestinian civil and political life.²⁷ In these works, the actuality of PA neoliberal economic policies tends to be assumed and asserted rather than interrogated. The PA's turn to economic neoliberalism is seen primarily as motivated by material interests of its elites, as well as shaped by the international powers and donors on which it depends. Whether focused on the rise of corrupt political elites and the hegemony of 'neoliberal crony capitalism', or on critiquing the Palestinian 'neoliberal development paradigm' and its uptake by Palestinian NGOs, these authors main argument is that by being wedded to neoliberalism in its various economic and political forms, the PA and allied political formations, as well as NGOs, have betrayed the Palestinian liberation project, de-politicised civil society and actively thwarted resistance to Israeli

²⁴ Khalidi & Samour, 'Neoliberalism as Liberation'.

²⁵ Haddad, *Palestine Ltd.*

²⁶ Turner, 'Completing the Circle'.

²⁷ Sibille Merz, 'Missionaries of the New Era': Neoliberalism and NGOs in Palestine', *Race & Class* 54/1 (2012), pp. 50–66; Dana, 'The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society'; Dana, 'Localising the Economy as a Resistance Response'; Jamil Hilal, 'Rethinking Palestine: Settler-Colonialism, Neo-Liberalism and Individualism in the West Bank and Gaza Strip', *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8/3 (2015), pp. 351–62; Tabar & Salamanca, *After Oslo*; Tartir 'Contentious Economics in Occupied Palestine'.

settler colonialism.²⁸ Through being wedded to neoliberal ideology these various national actors have directly or indirectly colluded with Israel and its ongoing dispossession of Palestine and Palestinians. A variation on this overall approach focuses on the intertwining of Israeli settler colonialism with neoliberalism, arguing that Israeli colonialism is the main force for the ‘neoliberal colonial re-structuring’ of Palestinian space, economy and political governance.²⁹

Bottom-Up Perspectives: Complexity, Contradiction, Uneven-ness

Countering these totalising frames in which neoliberalism appears to be powerfully everywhere, and is also seen as the cause of most of the political ills that preclude the Palestinian liberation project from going forward, are two in-depth ethnographic works that take a specific aspect of the so-called neoliberal turn as their point of departure: the study by Kareem Rabie of the iconic urban development project, Rawabi, and Chris Harker’s study of the everyday experience of bank debt among lower middle class Palestinian households in Ramallah.³⁰ It is notable that while both works focus on an archetypical neoliberal phenomenon, (Harker on consumer bank debt and Rabie on privatised urban planning) the authors actively refuse to invoke the neoliberal concept in order to avoid reproducing its totalising analytic version (Palestinian and otherwise). Rabie’s approach to the private, planned city of Rawabi, centres the claims and narratives of the planners, architects, investors, entrepreneurs and marketers of this real estate venture – widely lauded by international donors and peace process shepherds as a showcase of neoliberal solutions as a means to roll back the Israeli occupation while promoting peace and state building. His analysis ultimately shows how neoliberal forms and ideas can practically take hold within stateless, colonised spaces, not as a top-down totalising process, but rather as contradictory and fragmented circuits of uneven accumulation and partial incorporation into global processes and capital flows. In this way, it becomes possible to see how neoliberal processes can be simultaneously enmeshed in a nationalist project of state building as anti-occupation, while actively subtending Israeli colonisation. Through tracing the details of neoliberal political economic rhetoric, ideas and relations in action, his work offers a crucial counterweight to the dominant political economy approach to neoliberal Palestine.

Similarly, Harker’s study on the growth and circulation of consumer debt among Palestinian households in a lower middle-class Ramallah neighbourhood poses a robust critique to the dominant frame. Focusing on the development of a policy infrastructure that promotes financialised consumer loans to Palestinian households (a prototypical Fayyadist innovation) he argues that the effects of these financial instruments when carefully read through the experiences of borrowers, shows the conceptual limits of critical academic discourse on neoliberalism. The rise of consumer debt in Palestine is not an ‘economic tsunami’ in which neoliberalism suddenly appears as a coherent object that transforms multiple spheres of Palestinian life. Instead, neoliberal debt enters into an existing, complex social and moral landscape, and rather than instantly producing atom-

²⁸ Dana, ‘Localising the Economy as a Resistance Response’; Merz, ‘Missionaries of the New Era’; Dana, ‘The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society’; Tabar & Salamanca, ‘After Oslo’.

²⁹ Andy Clarno, ‘Neoliberal Colonization in the West Bank’ in *Social Problems*, 65/3 (2018).

³⁰ Rabie, *Palestine’s Throwing a Party*; Harker, *Spacing Debt*.

ised hyper-individualised subjects of debt, in the Palestinian context it translates into deepening the existing inter-dependence of kin networks and forms of social and moral obligation. Although Harker's study engages the geopolitical economy of Palestine's neoliberal debt regime, the close ethnographic reading of neoliberal debt at the centre of his analysis offers a more complex and nuanced picture. He finds that although the rise of consumer debt can somewhat be related to shifts in lifestyles and consumer desires, its primary motivation is livelihood survival rather than aspirations for neoliberal lifestyles.

Hybrid Subjectivities

Though Harker's book remains to date the only in-depth study that focuses on the social dimensions of neoliberalism, a handful of previous authors did make initial interventions into questions around the rise of neoliberal subjectivities and cultural forms in the Palestinian context. In Laura Junka-Aikio's analysis, focused on the rise of mobile phone technologies and providers, and their shifting and contradictory links to Palestinian nationalism and forms of selfhood, Junka-Aikio carefully traces the changing commercial messaging of the main (and iconic) Palestinian mobile phone provider, *Jawwal*, over the arc of the Second Intifada and Fayyadist periods.³¹ She shows how its more traditional nationalist messaging became increasingly infused with more conventional neoliberal tropes (global high-tech excellence, consumer choice and corporate environmental awareness). This was paralleled by a shift in popular discourse toward *Jawwal*, in which nationalist framings of the company's role in Palestinian life was increasingly superseded by discourses of individualised consumer rights and satisfaction, ones that could be better served by free market competition between telecom providers. In a similar vein, Noemi Casati notes how in the context of spatial and temporal 'stuckness',³² fear and cynicism towards nationalist politics, Palestinian university students express their longing for normalcy and escape through neoliberal registers of consumerist value and desire.³³ Rather than representing a simplistic notion of de-politicisation and the triumph of neoliberal subject formation, she argues that the seeming contradictions in students' discourses and practices point to the layered, multifaceted and non-linear nature of Palestinian political subjectivities. Her analysis suggests how ongoing attachments to ethics of resistance and nationalism can co-habit with neoliberal desires, while neoliberal forms of value can be a language through which to articulate disappointments with the failures of normative nationalist politics.

Both Casati and Junka-Aikio's interventions aim to trouble dominant representations of Palestinian political subjectivity as exclusively rooted in imaginaries of nationalism and resistance. Along with Harker, their work offers a counter to the either/or, black and white, resistance versus neoliberal collusion binaries posed by the dominant political and economic literature. Taken together, these authors suggest how neoliberal ideas and impulses can interpolate themselves into contemporary articulations of Palestinian personhood, without producing neoliberal subjects tout court. Their analysis shows the need to understand the circulation of neoliberal forms and ideas (and any traction they might

³¹ Junka-Aikio, 'Late Modern Subjects of Colonial Occupation'.

³² Andrew Jefferson, Simon Turner & Steffen Jensen, 'Introduction: On Stuckness and Sites of Confinement', *Ethnos* 84/1 (2019), pp. 1–13.

³³ Casati, 'Political Participation in a Palestinian University'.

gain) within the complexity of Palestinians' lived social and geopolitical worlds, including contending ethical projects and commitments, as well as counter-vailing material and discursive processes. As such, whether as modes of increased individualisation; new calculi of desire and value; emerging aspirational lifestyles; or novel forms of self-fashioning, neoliberal forms and ideas in the Palestinian context (as in others) interact with and are transformed by existing social arrangements and subjectivities – producing complex, hybridised subject positions as well as novel social and cultural formations. It is informed by these insights and approaches that the studies in this project seek to address.

Case Studies

In the next part of this paper, we take these theoretical points of departure forward, tracing how neoliberal norms and mores intermingle with other forces of subjection in the contemporary Palestinian context.

Transnational Investments in Artists as Development Workers: Gender Violence and Performance

Rania Jawad

My research project considers the work of the artist as development worker, and specifically when transnational donor investments position artists as researchers within an international development frame of gender-based violence. My interest is in the ways that the cultural practice of theatre is mobilised by a network of institutional bodies to produce experiences of embodying and/or witnessing forms of gendered violence. What are the limits of the analytical frames used to read such work? And what kind of life do these experiences take particularly for the artists whose labour such investments centre?

The Palestinian artistic-cultural sphere serves as a site to analyse imperial-colonial relationships of such transnational investments. The focus on theatre forefronts the embodied practice and performance of what is called human development. My research focuses on two dimensions: 1) outlining a three-piece intertwining of economic and ideological investments in cultural production, in gender development, and in what are advertised as the performance of 'real' stories, and 2) analysing artists' relationships to such projects through their motivations to participate in them and their reflections following their completion.

The first dimension provides an understanding of neoliberal ideologies playing out in the sphere of cultural production in ways that produce artists as witnesses and embodied narrators of gender-based violence for local and international audiences. The second complicates the 'terms of engagement' instituted by the international donor and its attendant local institutional network of bodies, specifically with regards to the artists' engagement in such projects collecting testimony on the violences Palestinian women experience.³⁴

³⁴ Cynthia A. Wood, 'Authorizing Gender and Development: "Third World Women," Native Informants, and Speaking Nearby', *Nepantla: Views from South* 2/3 (2001), pp. 429–47.

Here, I briefly consider as a case study one theatre project in 2014 commissioned by an international non-governmental agency and funded by a European government. Through the reflections of one of the actresses, she articulates that her experience do not follow nor can be contained within the logics of the threefold investments. Moreover, her reflections challenge a simplified notion of context or structure as an assemblage of forces outside that infiltrate and condition the work of art, its institutions and artists' experiences.³⁵ This analysis extends to a broader phenomenon of the intricacies of employing local actors in globalised gender and development agendas in the Global South mediated through local cultural production.

The theatre project was initiated by a local regional officer of an international non-governmental agency who sought a 'creative industry' to implement its global priority of gender programming. Theatre artists were commissioned to conduct a series of interactive workshops with predominantly female participants in 11 localities categorised as marginalised in the West Bank over a one-month period. At the close of each workshop, the theatre artists identified one or two women to record an interview with, whose personal story could serve as source material for a play with the consent of the women. The play was workshopped over another one-month period and opened later that year, advertised as addressing the issue of gender-based violence and being drawn from real stories.

What the project brings together is transnational economic investments in the global developmental agenda of gender-based violence as a product of an imperial assemblage of global governmentality, with the belief in artistic production as a mobilising and consciousness-raising platform.³⁶ The artists are positioned as witnesses and documenters of gender-based violence, and the women participants as objects of development, in effect performing their struggles. The theatre project is dominated by disciplinary mechanisms of management that structure what is produced, how it is produced and how it is measured. It is clear how the 'real stories' are produced, how the workshops with the women are shaped and monitored, how the theatre's liveness is facilitated, documented and archived. The documentation of process, narrative reporting and project evaluation, which are requirements of funders, most often produce a linear progression of success that serves a performative function, generating further investments in similar projects of culture as expedient for individualising notions of women's empowerment, human rights and freedom of expression.

Scholars have critiqued the driving logics underlying these investments: from the domestication of violence and production of gender-based violence as a culturally specific problem of the underdeveloped Global South,³⁷ to the performance of one's pain as a donor transaction, institutionalising notions of Western superiority while legitimising

³⁵ Randy Martin (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–12.

³⁶ Rema Hammami, 'Follow the Numbers: Global Governmentality and the Violence against Women Agenda in Occupied Palestine', in Janet Halley, Prabha Kotiswaran, Rachel Rebouché and Hila Shamir (eds), *Governance Feminism: Notes from the Field* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 479–504.

³⁷ Penny Johnson, "'Violence All Around Us": Dilemmas of Global and Local Agendas Addressing Violence against Palestinian Women, an Initial Intervention', *Cultural Dynamics* 20/2 (2008), pp. 119–32; Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Seductions of the "Honor Crime"', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22/1 (2011), pp. 17–63; Hammami, 'Follow the Numbers'.

and authorising the role of the witness to personal testimonies or real stories.³⁸ George Yúdice explored the dominance of neoliberal economic policies that conceive artists as ‘service providers who extend the reach of capital’ to what are deemed underdeveloped communities.³⁹ While Laura Edmondson wrote of the overreach of academic writing that privileges a belief or hope in the emancipatory and transformative potential of the arts, over an uneasiness witnessed in the world about the unjust, the exploited, the despairing and the genocidal.⁴⁰ The ways these logics are intertwined positions the theatre artists as short-term service providers to the ‘underdeveloped’ within their communities, but structurally so only to the extent that they are able to contribute to an understanding of gender-based violence as a Palestinian issue in need of some form of intervention. The project reporting and the various news coverage of the play, in this case, in line with most journalistic and much academic scholarship on Palestinian theatre, underscores the significance of such cultural work engaged in the community amidst the violence of the settler-colonial regime that is buttressed by inter- and trans-national governmental and institutional complicities. As these logics play out and produce specific relations, communities and experiences for those involved, a reading of the artists’ engagements in the project at times affirms, while also demonstrates the limits of these framing and shaping logics.

As each of the artists’ reflections on the project speak to different dynamics and perceptions, here I offer a brief discussion of one of the artists’ reflections, which is not meant to be representative but as one reading through the structural frames. Her reflections draw from three sources: (i) the text of the theatre play that includes testimonies from each of the actors speaking in their own voices and identifying as themselves, (ii) a text she wrote in a magazine that was specifically produced for the project and distributed to audience members during the performance of the play, and (iii) a personal interview conducted with her over a year following the completion of this project. The actress is from 1948 Palestine and joined the project in support of the Theatre, its politicised work and the struggles it had faced over the past number of years.

Embedded nearly halfway through the play is her testimony where she attempts to articulate her experience after conducting the 12 interactive workshops with about 200 women participants.

She says:

‘...after we went through all the workshops and having heard all the women’s stories, I felt closer and closer. Closer to what? I don’t know. But I felt close. It means I didn’t feel like I was trying to get into some sphere that was far removed from me. I felt like I was talking about myself in a way - that I was talking about my grandmother, my aunt or my mother.’

³⁸ Sherene Razack, ‘Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses’, *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* 29/4 (2007), pp. 375–94; Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Antonina Griecci Woodsum, Himmat Zu’bi & Rachel Busbridge, ‘Funding Pain: Bedouin Women and Political Economy in the Naqab/Negev’, *Feminist Economics* 20/4 (2014), pp. 164–86.

³⁹ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 332.

⁴⁰ Laura Edmondson, ‘Of Sugarcoating and Hope’, *TDR* 51/2 (2007), pp. 7–10.

A little later in the play the actress plays the role of one of the women, describing how she was married at 13 years old and naming the eight children she gave birth to, those that survived and those that did not.

As the actresses' voice is merged with the woman in her performance, in the magazine text the actress juxtaposes their voices on paper. She divides her written text into two parts: the top half is prefaced by 'She says' and the lower half by 'I say'. The top half is a portion of the woman's testimony that the actress performed onstage. 'She says' describes the woman's experience at 13 years old, wearing her school uniform and playing in the street. Her hopes to continue her studies and play are interrupted when she is forced to marry. Below in the section 'I say', the actress responds. She begins stating that she has not had any of the experiences that the woman 'She says' describes, not getting married nor liking school nor playing in the street. But she remembers her school days and her uniform when she was 13 years old. The actress describes growing up in a city with an overwhelming feeling of alienation – a language not her own, a city not her own, a history not hers. The actress writes:

'Each day when I left the house, the city would steal two cups of my childhood until I was only left with the faint hope of wearing a school uniform like hers. A uniform that will give me back my childhood in another place that feels more like me.'

The actress does not attempt to find similarity between her experiences and the woman's. It is perhaps the unfamiliarity that links them, from the actress' perspective. The closeness that the actress describes in the play is not about a similar or relatable experience, nor does she put herself in a position of knowing. Her individuality is porous rather than buttressed, as the actress acknowledges it is as if she may be speaking about herself or a close female relative. In the magazine text, the actress recounts the settler-colonial geography steadily stealing her childhood to the extent that the actress would find herself or a closer version of herself if she grew up in a place resembling that of the woman. The actress' text in the magazine and her performance of the woman's testimony onstage, are both embodiments of the woman's narrated experience as shaped, presented and represented by the actors. The experience also includes acts of editing, of turning into one's own, perhaps romanticisation via the school uniform, and performance in the context of a commissioned theatre production.

In my interview with the actress, she acknowledged the difficulty in knowing that the workshops with the women were conducted specifically to obtain source material for the production, that the women's personal life experiences were to be turned into stories to be performed. She further explained the dynamic when she recorded the personal experiences of select women following the interactive theatre workshops. She said: 'With the recorder in front of you, they [the women] see you as someone who can help them, not as a theatre-maker.'

At the moment of collecting testimony, a modelled image of a cultural practitioner conducting the work of a development worker is decoupled, whether in the perception of the women participants or that of the actress herself. The artist as service provider breaks down in these spaces of intimacy as it does during the un-intimate public performances for donor audiences that were commissioned alongside the performance for the women

participants. Questions of ethics and accountability in witnessing, documenting and performing the women's experiences were integral to the actress' engagement in the project. Each artists' reflection on the project deviates from another yet shows that the life and livedness of such work cannot be confined within the logics of economic and ideological investments in cultural work as gender development. Exploring the artists' reflections as they labour in such projects embedded in broader networks, mediations and investments begins to foreground that what they experience, translate, embody and archive for us is not produced, shaped, expected or accounted for in the commissioning, managing and documenting of the project alone.

The *Felestineya* Program in Palestine

Amirah Silmi

This research investigates how the Palestinian national bank, the Bank of Palestine, constructs a financialised feminine subject via its financial inclusion program, *Felestinyeya*. I use interviews with two programme officials from the Bank, in addition to interviews with women whose portraits the bank display on billboards as their role models and success stories. Further, I deepen this interview material through discourse analysis of material about women's 'success' on the program's Facebook page, *Felestinyeya* - فلسطينية, as well as on stories and interviews with 'women entrepreneurs' participating in the program and featured on the radio channel RadioNisaaFm, in partnership with the Bank of Palestine.⁴¹

Several studies relate financial inclusion to microfinance. Most of these see financial inclusion as another way of extracting value from the poor and marginalised, women included.⁴² Others position debt and microfinance as a form of governmentality that constructs disciplined, financialised subjectivities.⁴³ The Palestinian Monetary Authority (PMA), for instance, translates women's financial inclusion to the acceptance of loans for microenterprises. As the PMA and its partner, the Women's Economic Forum (WEF), describes, such financial inclusion 'empowers' women (as a marginalised group), while guaranteeing the 'health and stability of the banking system'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See <https://www.facebook.com/palwoman/> and <https://www.radionisaa.ps/>

⁴² Lamia Karim, 'Demystifying Micro-Credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh', *Cultural Dynamics* 20/1 (2008), pp. 5–29; Susanne Soederberg, 'Universalising Financial Inclusion and the Securitisation of Development', *Third World Quarterly* 34/4 (2013), pp. 593–612; Isabelle Guérin, Solène Morvant-Roux, & Magdalena Villarreal, *Microfinance, Debt and Over-Indebtedness* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014); Ghazal Zulfiqar, 'Financializing the Poor: 'Dead Capital', Women's Gold and Microfinance in Pakistan', *Economy and Society* 46/3-4 (2017), pp. 476–98; Chris Harker, 'The Promise of Financial Inclusion: Finance as Future in Palestine', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 103/4 (2021), pp. 320–36.

⁴³ Srilatha Batliwala & Deepa Dhanraj, 'Gender Myths that Instrumentalise Women: A View from the Indian Frontline', *IDS Bulletin* 35 (2004), pp. 11–18; Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Immaterial Labor', in Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt (eds), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, NED-New edition. Vol. 7. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 133–148; Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man* (Trans. Joshua David Jordan), (Amsterdam: Semiotext, 2011); Karunakaran Kalpana, 'Economic Entitlements via Entrepreneurial Conduct: Women and Financial Inclusion in Neoliberal India', *Journal of World-Systems Research* 21/1 (2015), pp. 50–68.

⁴⁴ 'Business Women Forum-Palestine', *Facebook* (2021). Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/>

Chris Harker has argued that the financial inclusion process led by the economic and political elite in Palestine ‘is contextualised in relation to global organisations (UN, World Bank) and global best practices’.⁴⁵ For Harker, financial inclusion:

‘is a set of practices that cohere around promissory futures and particular (Palestinian) space-times, which ensures institutions like the PMA and PCMA continue in a context where a heavy reliance on international funding and support shapes policy and practice... Crucially, the promises of financial inclusion replace the increasingly less credible promises of [national] liberation, return [to Palestine from exile], and independent, functional statehood’.⁴⁶

What the Bank of Palestine, PMA, WEF and even the women themselves describe as political and economic empowerment, translates into training in entrepreneurship, geared toward ‘becoming’ a financialised subject able to take and manage loans. According to the bank, to be a project manager is to become a leader in society. As the image on the *Felestineya* Facebook page illustrates, the project aims to ‘empower’ women to ride metaphorical rockets into the sky. As such, and according to the PMA and its associates in the WEF, the *Felestineya* project claims to raise women’s ‘banking awareness’ by encouraging their participation in, and use of, digital financial services [while] facilitating their access to microenterprises and funding.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Harker argues that what financial inclusion achieves is the ‘colonizing and undermining [of] social life’. Such imperatives create what he terms an obligatory subjectivity through a process of decapacitation, one that entails having to ‘work a lot’, which, while constructing a financialised subject, ‘undoes the social support systems that enable Palestinian society in the West Bank to function’.⁴⁸

The bank downplays the business and financial aspects of the program in their narrative in favour of development. While the bank positions women’s needs and empowerment as the main motives of its programme, the developmental and empowerment discourse employed reiterates economic efficiency approaches to gender and development.⁴⁹ The program is described as being founded on ‘the belief in the importance of improving the standard of living of the Palestinian woman, which will positively reflect on the Palestinian family, economy and society as a whole’. The bank sees the development of investment opportunities and the promotion of economic and social growth on the local level as achieved through ‘motivating women, and giving them a bigger role in all sectors’. Moreover, the bank depicts its mission as one of remaking Palestinian women, so they become ‘leaders, lively and active’.⁵⁰

This remaking entails a dual process of subjection/subjugation that does not allow for the transgression of capitalist patriarchy. As the bank states on its website: ‘the [programme]

[BusinessWomenForum/posts/4616120845092614](https://www.facebook.com/palwoman/posts/4616120845092614) (accessed 7 December 2023).

⁴⁵ Chris Harker, ‘The Promise of Financial Inclusion’, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ ‘Business Women Forum-Palestine’ Facebook page.

⁴⁸ Harker, *Spacing Debt*, p. 132

⁴⁹ Cecilia Sardenberg, ‘Liberal vs. Liberating Empowerment: A Latin American Feminist Perspective on Conceptualising Women’s Empowerment’, *IDS Bulletin* 39 (2008), p. 5.

⁵⁰ ‘Felestineya – فلسطينية’, Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/palwoman/> (accessed 7 December 2023).

is... the first initiative of its kind to care for women, and widen their horizons in all social economic and familial aspects', thus positioning the bank as protector and provider in a patriarchy that is not limited to kinship relations, but also a competitor in the process of creating the subordinate and dependent woman, a woman who is indebted to the bank for the horizons it opens to her. Or, as many women interviewees, as well as the bank itself, proudly declare: women owe their making to the bank. This remaking is achieved through reception of the bank's services. It is measured by women opening checking accounts instead of saving accounts, and in applying for and receiving credit.

The neoliberal promise that anyone could be an entrepreneur, according to Maurizio Lazzarato, creates what he terms as the indebted man, 'at once responsible and guilty for his particular fate'.⁵¹ This also applies to the woman who is told that her being a woman is not a reason why she too cannot be 'empowered' into becoming an indebted woman. Lazzarato demonstrates that the debt economy combines 'work on the self' and labour.⁵² If men are to make an enterprise of themselves under neoliberalism, women become the enterprises of the bank and the credit industry, their realisation of themselves as *homo economicus* can only be achieved through the making of them by the bank.

The process of remaking the woman to become a financialised subject involves not only the reception of financial services; it also involves the way the women communicate and perceive themselves. When the woman learns to use the media to market her products, she also learns to transform her speech, writing and even body language.⁵³ It is in this way revealing that many of the women interviewed repeated the same phrase that the bank made them, emphasising how women involved have been transformed into a financial product of the bank.

In the case of the woman, not only will she, as the indebted (wo)man, have to take upon herself the costs and risks of the economic and financial disasters caused by neoliberalism,⁵⁴ to these are added the unrecognised patriarchal burdens of being a woman, a mother and a house worker. Indeed, the Bank recognises women's plurality as well as recognising their 'special' needs, a recognition that is necessary to subsume them ultimately into the category of the financialised subject.

As the Facebook page states, the programme: 'seeks to reach all groups of women: entrepreneurs, employees and housewives, by providing advice and guidance that concern a woman's life to create a balance between her work life and familial and personal concerns.'

Indeed, the posts on the page are very diverse and inclusive in their orientation: they include posters about rearing children and related contemporary concerns. Posts, in other words, that encourage work and persistence, initiative change, variation and development. Furthermore, other posts are directed to the ordinary and the everyday: traditional meals, certain holidays, or religious occasions. In this way, the bank becomes part of its audiences' everyday life, a family member who greets the community every morning.

⁵¹ Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, pp. 8–9.

⁵² Ibid, p. 11.

⁵³ Felestineya – فلسطينية, Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/palwoman/>

⁵⁴ Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, p. 9.

While women's reproductive roles are therefore acknowledged in the programme, they are not treated as impediments to financial subjectification. That is, the women are to learn that these roles should not stop them from pursuing what is, in the bank's discourse, their 'dream': the realisation of themselves as entrepreneurs and successful women. Through these multiple individualised success stories, women are called upon to carry the burden of their invisible reproductive labour in the background of the ten-hours of daily work apparently required to run a successful project. It is therefore not that motherhood and domestic work are condemned, or that women are called upon to liberate themselves from such burdens. On the contrary, there is another page for mothers: (#Mompreneur-PAL). The main point is that a woman should join the financial world as an entrepreneur: a superhero who does not let housework or children come in her way. Or, in the case of mom-entrepreneurs, motherhood gains meaning and value by itself becoming a financialised subject position, by adding the bank and its services as an important and integral part/partner of their family.

Harker argues that 'the processes of individualisation and de-individualisation resulting from debt are affected by other kinds of bonds and obligations [like] those of family, since people in Palestine are neither completely individual, nor do they act in a collective manner'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the bank often depicts the family and community as impediments standing in the women's way to achieve their dreams, while suggesting the bank and the women are the believers. And while the women's stories do give contradictory accounts, stressing on the one hand the impeding role of a non-believing family and community versus the believing, encouraging and supportive role of the bank, the stories of the women interviewees who were used by the bank to promote the *Felestineya* program (while not being part of it) show, on the other hand, the instrumental role their families played in their ability to make their projects.

By focusing on the development of the self, on optimism, positivity and energy, these stories of commercial success are considered, by the bank, to absorb the hugely frustrated energy of the citizenry in the context of a weak economy. This context itself is not to be challenged: no collective or political work is necessary to transform it, only the self, struggling with itself and re-domesticating itself, to borrow from Nietzsche, can keep the illusion of the free, willing and transcendent subject alive, now in the figure of the indebted man/woman.

⁵⁵ Harker, *Spacing Debt*, p. 100.

Conclusion

Polly Withers

The research presented in this report demonstrates the pressing need to engage in bottom-up, gendered and sociological accounts of neoliberalism that challenge, what is in the literature sometimes assumed to be, its totalising a/effects in contemporary Palestine. Throughout, we have argued that neoliberal rationalities never operate in a vacuum: they always enter living social arrangements, replete with pre-existing social, political and ethical normativities. Our two case studies in this sense thus dovetail the limits within, as well as the reach of, neoliberal framing practices in current-day Palestine.

Theoretically, then, the project makes twinned contributions to Palestine/Middle East studies and feminist media, culture and communications. First, as has been demonstrated, surprisingly little work engages Palestine's neoliberal 'turn' through sociological lenses. As such, accounts that trouble how different actors negotiate and/or push back on macro-political economic shifts is sorely missing from the literature. The research presented here therefore opens lines for future enquiry into the shifting, fractured and unstable ways that people actually live out diverse subjectivising forces on the ground. Second, and as made clear from the outset of this document, very little work in feminist media studies applies the field's core concepts when considering gender, sexuality and the media in Palestine, or MENA. As a whole, then, by problematising feminist media studies in/of MENA, this work makes a further contribution that encourages future consideration of the ways in which dominant scholarly frames are, and are not, taken up, broken down and/or selectively incorporated by subjects within the region's contemporary mediatised environments and identity frameworks. Overall, this study therefore opens new directions for unpacking media and cultural production through gender lenses in contexts of ongoing statelessness, settler-colonial violence and neoliberal globalisation.

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