

# MANY WAYS OF BECOMING A WOMAN: THE CASE OF UNMARRIED ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN “GIRLS”



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Unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women are normatively expected to remain virgins and social juniors, yet in practice their handling of their sexuality, and by extension their femininity, produces a range of social personas. While some indeed remain submissive and suppressed, others undergo sexual maturation. Detailed ethnographic attention to their lifestyles, and particularly to their sexuality, disproves any stereotypic impressions held of this group of Arab women. As liminal persons, unmarried women serve not only as delineators of normative female sexuality, but also as agents of change who expand the norm and make it more inclusive. Contextualizing the phenomenon historically, the analysis considers how this adjustment of gender responds to larger concerns with modernity and marginality. (Sexuality, virginity, gender, liminality)

Linguistically referred to as “girls” (*banāt*), unmarried Palestinian women in Israel have a strong likelihood of being barred from adult femininity, as well as being generally marginalized. Local explanations of the use of “girls” as a form of reference to unmarried women emphasize their assumed virginal state. The term *banāt* also means “daughters,” which highlights the second aspect of their classification. As those who “remain daughters” (*byithallin banāt*), their primary role remains the one they have in their family of orientation, which has no adult position for them. They therefore allegedly remain fixed in an ongoing child-like status.

The linguistic gesture of infantilizing and desexualizing unmarried women represents a normative expectation that the passage to womanhood should occur in a specific, institutionalized form. Against this narrow expectation, this ethnography of unmarried women<sup>1</sup> discloses a wide diversity of personal types, ranging from extremely submissive or “girlish” to outgoing and charismatic individuals who can hardly be described as girls. This essay focuses on the sexuality of these women, and uses their liminality as a prism to understand notions of womanhood in Israeli-Palestinian culture generally. Formal and practical forms of local knowledge are not consistent with the local conviction that unless females marry, they cannot mature in a socially accepted way. Despite the stigma associated with the term *banāt*, many unmarried females overcome the pitfalls set by the norm of marriage and do attain womanhood. These persons successfully resist their restriction to become sexually mature, social adults. In so doing, many of them manage not to lose moral standing. Against heavy odds, some even manage to increase their respectability. At the same time, they remain liminal personas, habituating an interstitial space between normative age and gender categories.

The ways in which unmarried females handle their sexuality, and by extension their femininity, range from extreme suppression to self-rejoicing sexual awakening.



As liminal personas, unmarried women serve not only as delineations of normative female sexuality, but also as agents of change who expand the norm and make it more inclusive. Considering that structure-antistructure energies are historically informed, the analysis here looks at how this adjustment of gender responds to larger concerns with modernity and marginality.

### UNMARRIED WOMEN<sup>2</sup>

Brief ethnographic descriptions of three unmarried women living in the same urban community exemplify the diversity of lifestyles, life opportunities, and personality types representative of unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women. They vary in their religious affiliations, social class, housing conditions, education, employment, and family relationships.

Rose, a 32-year-old Christian woman, is the oldest of six siblings and a high-school graduate. She has worked eight years as the secretary of a local contractor, a job she likes and takes pride in, for a minimum-wage salary. For the past few years, her family has had hard economic times:

This year has been the hardest in all my life. We recently married off my brother and exactly around that time my father fell ill and lost his job. My other siblings also did not work for a while. . . . We invested a lot in my brother's wedding. First we bought gold for his bride and then, when they were ready to get married, we bought an apartment for them. We also paid for the wedding, so it all accumulated to huge sums. Now my siblings are working again, but both my parents are not. I regularly give my income to my parents, although I do keep some to myself, to buy clothes and to go out to cafes with my friends. When I was growing up we never suffered any economic hardship. We used to eat meat every day and entertain lavishly. I think that the purchase of the apartment brought the evil eye on us. People started envying us [and thinking] where did we get the money to buy an apartment, with both parents being out of work. . . .

I am single because I have not yet found the right guy. There was one that I was interested in, but he got engaged to someone else. Since then my heart has been closed. I don't think of anyone now and also I have very low expectations from our town's people. The Christians of our town do not think kindly of each other, unlike the Muslims. Muslim women all marry eventually. Muslim men are willing even to marry women with bodily defects. In our community, on the other hand, the family inspects the girl and the history of her family very closely and people are extremely picky. . . . Well, it could also be a matter of luck. I go to church every Sunday. I'm a very straight girl; never dated a guy. I never had as much as a stroke from a man, really, but still, I have remained unmarried. . . . I went to various fortunetellers and learned that I had received several spells (*'amal*). And it is true, I can see that guys fancy me but something is keeping them away. . . .

I'm also very independent and I think that it deters the guys. For example, last year my brother got married and I helped him buy the apartment and bought many things for him. So people here are sure that I have a lot of money, which I don't. You see I gave him nearly everything I had. Maybe this is the reason that guys are afraid to approach me. Guys are afraid of independent girls. . . . Now I can't afford to marry someone who is unable to purchase an apartment. I want someone who is settled. I'm not seventeen anymore and cannot afford to live for another ten years without money, until we manage to save enough to buy an apartment. If I marry now I will need to get pregnant right away and all that. It is not that I insist on someone rich.



A social worker by training, Hiyām, a 32-year-old Muslim woman, occupies a managerial position at a large rehabilitation institution. With benefits, her salary is slightly higher than the average wage. She is the only one of ten children with an academic education but not the only one who has remained unmarried above the age of 30. For several years she has been living on her own in a rented apartment in the city where she works, using her salary to pay for the rent and for her personal expenses, which include holidays with friends abroad or in Israel and the maintenance of a car. Unlike Rose, Hiyām has never made financial contributions to her family's household. Not only that, she has occasionally asked them for help with exceptional expenses, such as paying her university fees or buying her car. She has contributed consistently, however, to familial decision-making. She is the principal advisor and arbitrator to her parents and her siblings who still live with them, and to her married siblings and their children. She counsels in matters ranging from finances, children's schooling, and medical treatment, to family disputes.

Hiyām has had several romantic relationships with men, some of which included sexual intercourse. Much to her disappointment, all these men married other women. Time and again, her lovers explained that they loved her, but could not envision her as their wife. One of them even told her outright that although he liked her very much, he was afraid of her independence and strength of personality. Hiyām says:

Arab men are all cowards. They are all their mothers' boys and they want weak wives on whom they will be able to act out all their insecurities. They all let their mothers find brides for them. Personally, I think that their fear of marrying an independent woman is silly, because a man should actually want to have a strong and independent woman who will support him and be his partner.

(Similar experiences emerged from the life histories of other interviewees, where their romantic involvement ended when the men left them because they were "too independent.")

Like most of her other siblings, Na'ima, the 41-year-old sister of Hiyām, has only an elementary education. A working woman during most of her adult life, she has been employed in a variety of small industries, including a sewing workshop, a chemical plant, and a family-owned supermarket. Unlike Hiyām, but like the vast majority of unmarried women, Na'ima has never left her parents' residence. She has always contributed part of her salary to the household economy for food and more substantial goods, such as a refrigerator or furniture. Also, like other unmarried women in her situation, Na'ima sets aside small portions of her income (which is about 30 per cent below the legal minimum wage) for her personal expenses, which include clothes, jewelry, and occasional trips abroad with organized groups.

Na'ima has never contemplated moving away from home; her salary and local conventions do not allow it. That her sister has been leading a very different life has not changed her sense of what is right and proper for a woman in her situation. For some years Na'ima has assumed caretaking duties in her extended family, helping her sister-in-law care for her children and looking after her aging parents, whose health



is poor. Because of her parents' condition, she rarely goes to weddings or recreational events or spends weekends at the village of her married sisters.

Notwithstanding the physical confinement that her responsibilities necessitate, she refuses to share them with her siblings, even when they offer to substitute for her. She takes pride in her sacrifices and in the knowledge that people are dependent on her. The nieces and nephews she helped raise, she boasted, call her "mama" to this day. However, her parents, siblings, nephews, and nieces are not as grateful to her as she declares. (From my observations, she has not been exempt from criticism and her share of family disputes.) In short, her status in the household is lower than her brothers' (three of whom share the same residence) and Hiyām's.

Over the years Na'ima has had some acquaintanceships with men, yet none materialized into an engagement or even formal visits. In her early twenties she was romantically involved with a young neighbor, whom she then left of her own accord. She explains:

He was excessively jealous, so I terminated the relationship. I thought that with him being so jealous we would always have problems if we married. He accepted the separation but his mother cursed me that I shall never have a husband and children. At the time I ignored her, but when I passed 30 and was still unmarried I remembered the curse. I went to a specialist to lift the spell ('amal), and she tried several methods, but to no avail. Finally she admitted that the task was beyond her powers. . . . But I don't despair. I put my trust in God.

In later years, Na'ima met a few other men who expressed interest in marrying her. One was a widower with children and another was a worker from one of the neighboring Arab countries who contemplated becoming an Israeli citizen. Mostly she met men through work or through friends, and socialized with them generally in the company of other people. Although two of them expressed their intention of coming to meet her parents, they never did. Na'ima claims not to have had physical intimacy with a man and never went beyond affectionate caressing or occasional kisses.

Israeli Palestinians, males and females alike, are highly motivated to marry. Females are expected to marry sometime between their late teens and early twenties. But quite a few women, both Christians and Muslims, delay marriage through their twenties and thirties.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, local Muslims, who are the majority, are not keen to acknowledge this fact, and prefer instead to think of unmarried women as a Christian problem. Statistics indeed reflect a greater propensity for Christian women to delay marriage and to remain unmarried for life (age 45 and older).<sup>4</sup> That Muslims show surprise at the phenomenon, or deny it, indicates a powerful belief that marriage is the natural trajectory of a woman's life. It also reflects the structural transparency of these individuals, a theme that recurs in the discussion. A noteworthy point is that the category of never-married women is diverse. In many respects it is rather arbitrary because it includes individuals from different classes, religions, and status groups. Unmarried Palestinian women, both Christian and Muslim, range from illiterate to highly educated, and live in cities and villages. Differences in personality yield diverse ways of handling their exceptional situation. This notwithstanding, never-married women constitute a conceptual category whose significance lies in its



capacity to destabilize the normative gender-age classifications, as reflected for example in the term *banāt*.

Local people tended to suggest that women remain unmarried either because more females are born than males or because young females have become "too much" (*akthar min-i-llāzem*): too educated, too independent, or too modern. While statistics (Sa'ar 2000; Lewin n.d.) refute a sex-imbalance explanation, the reiterations of the phrase "too much" are indicative. The Palestinians have undergone successive traumas following their wars with first the Zionist movement and then with the state of Israel. Among other things, marriage pools (Khoury 1991) were depleted by flight, deportation, and emigration, and marriage communities were separated by international borders. Even after some of these intercommunal marriage relationships were later restored, the borders still inflict significant status gaps on marriage partners, which in turn affect bride price, bride/groom availability, and the relative positioning of husbands and wives inside cross-border marriages. For Palestinians who have become Israeli citizens, class subordination (Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov 1993; Swirski and Conur-Atyias 2002; Kraus and Yonay 2000) has entailed housing distress, particularly in cities, which has caused young males to delay marriage and then marry younger females, often skipping their original marriage cohorts.

Beyond marriage-specific factors, the sense of imbalance that resonates in the phrase *akthar min-i-llāzem* reflects the overall disempowerment of Israeli Palestinians, who have been exposed to ongoing civil, economic, and political discrimination (Smootha 2002; Ghanem 1998; Rouhana 1998). Not infrequently, the unsettling political-economic conditions are framed in terms of modernity and its supposed irresolvable tension with authentic Palestinian culture. For example, it is common to hear people explain that burgeoning consumerism has made local girls too demanding and proud. They insist on getting their own apartment upon marriage and refuse to settle for a room in the house of the groom's parents. Since this demand is very difficult to meet, young males are said to have no alternative but to look for brides in the West Bank and Gaza, who are more submissive and accustomed to a harsh life, which for local girls reduces marriage partners.

The local concern with women remaining unmarried is understandable, considering the strong value Israeli-Palestinian society puts on marriage. However, the presence of unmarried women in the community is not new (Fleischmann 2003). In fact, considering the importance of these persons for their families as caretakers and breadwinners, it is plausible that contrary to its labeling as extraordinary, nonmarriage of women has been a permanent aspect of Palestinian family systems.

### NORMATIVE FEMALE SEXUALITY

Israeli Palestinians conceive of female sexuality as composed of two basic components, reproduction and pleasure, which they see as contradictory rather than complementary. Reproduction is the positive side of female sexuality and, as long as it is well contained within the marital bond, it is exalted and celebrated. This is



attested, for example, in the popular tendency to idealize mothers and motherly love. Conversely, female sexual pleasure is seen as intrinsically immoral and threatening (Hasan 1999). Women who practice sex for pleasure—in fact, women who so much as have sexual desire—are immoral almost by definition and cannot be good wives and mothers (Shokeid 1982). This normative construct is widely documented for other Middle Eastern cultures (Dwyer 1978; Boddy 1982; Sabbah 1984; Moghissi 1999; Lindisfarne 1994; Ilkkaracan and Seral 2000).

Female sexual desire is believed to be an innate potential that is active from menarche until menopause. Rather than becoming automatically activated at puberty, however, it is believed to require initiation through heterosexual encounter. Female homosexuality, although not unheard of, is considered irrelevant to the awakening of normal female sexuality. Unlike men, whose sexual desire is expected to awaken naturally at adolescence, women are believed to need men in order to become aware of their own sexuality (Vieille 1978; Shuhud 1999). Although female sexual desire is immoral by definition, it can remain under control if handled properly, so that even when women do become sexually active upon marriage, their sexual energy should remain, as much as possible, confined to reproduction and motherhood, and should not swell to its full capacity (Shokeid 1982; Dwyer 1978).

A second component of womanhood, the female reproductive drive, is constructed differently. Unlike female sexual desire, which is believed to depend on men for awakening and then satisfaction, the female reproductive drive is seen as autonomous and as evolving without male intervention. While women need men to get pregnant and raise children, the longing of women to have children and the strong attachment that they develop to their own or others' children are seen as completely independent of sexual contact. Alongside the belief in the female compulsion for nurturing and mothering, the rising divorce rates among Muslims, along with welfare benefits for single mothers, have encouraged an increasing number of women to forfeit men's participation in supporting and raising their children. Female sexuality, then, is regarded as having two morally contradictory components. The sensual component, seen as potentially dangerous, requires male arousal, while the female desire for children is seen as positive and as relatively independent of sexual experience.

While the highly moralistic notion of female sensuality suggests a strong influence of religious beliefs, it is important to note that the split construction of female sexuality is shared by Christians and Muslims (Peristiany 1966), even with respect to Palestinian women living under Palestinian authority: "Among both Christians and Muslims, everyday ordinary reality is influenced more by tradition than by religion per se, though admittedly it is difficult to delineate definitively between the two" (Rubenberg 2001:55). Within the Muslim majority, too, there is no single approach to sexuality (see also Abu-Lughod 1997; Moghissi 1999; Ilkkaracan 2000). Besides tradition and religion, the lives of Israeli Palestinians are influenced, to varying degrees, by some secular ideologies such as liberalism,



socialism, and modernization, which contribute to the construction of gender, body, and sexuality.

Feminist scholarship on the region has criticized the prevalent orientalist tendency in the literature to create static and homogeneous depictions of Arab women as passive victims of their culture (Abu-Lughod 2002). This article draws on informal sexual behaviors of unmarried women to show that, notwithstanding the restrictive norm of female sexual morality, the actual variety of sexual behaviors that are considered appropriate among Israeli Palestinians is hardly narrow.

### VIRGINITY

Unmarried women are expected to remain virgins. This was confirmed by various sources, among them a local sheik (see also Dwyer 1978). People say that virginity means an intact hymen, a physical condition that is easily proven by bleeding when the hymen is broken. While two or three decades ago a stained sheet would be produced to prove the virginity of a new bride, today such public display is uncommon. Women call their mothers and sisters the morning after the wedding to tell them, "*Dakhalna*" (we penetrated), and many brides continue to put a kerchief or a towel on their bed, to be stained with their blood, even if they never intend to show it to anyone but their husband. One Muslim woman in her twenties told me that her father had demanded to see the stained material after her wedding night, but that her husband said, "No, throw it away. What kind of people are we? It's enough that I know." A 38-year-old Christian who had been married for 22 years said that even though she had never actually shown her stained towel to anyone other than her husband, she was keeping it as a souvenir.

Notwithstanding the local emphasis on bleeding as a measurement of virginity, in practice the most important thing for a bride is to receive public recognition that she is a virgin. This is not necessarily conditional upon her bleeding on her wedding night. Men and women alike say that a virgin does not necessarily bleed the first time she has sexual intercourse. Some hymens, they explain, are flexible or thin while others are thick and inflexible, so maybe one girl in four bleeds when she has sex for the first time (see Saadawi 1990). Additionally, almost everyone mentioned that today it is possible to undergo an operation to restore a broken hymen.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that bleeding as an indication of virginity has become somewhat of an anachronism, the virginity standard itself remains widely accepted. People largely agree that girls should remain virgins until they marry, but differ regarding the use of blood as concrete evidence, which seems increasingly to be regarded as primitive and inaccurate. An enlightened husband, people say, should not need material proof to know that his wife was a virgin. This view, although not shared by everyone, suggests that virginity is more than a physical condition. It implies that it is a mental and/or emotional state. In its stricter and more comprehensive sense, the virginity code demands that unmarried women should not only remain virgins in body (that is, avoid heterosexual intercourse), but also that their hearts should remain



innocent of any romantic attachment, and their minds ignorant of information regarding sex.

Girls' socialization includes practices that are geared to keeping their sexuality dormant. From an early age, girls participate in a lively discourse on sexuality, whose contents describe sex as scary and disgusting, and generally and abstractly tabooed. They are persistently discouraged from seeking contradictory information and their social encounters with males are minimized, or when this is not possible, desexualized (classmates are reclassified as "brothers"). The general taboo on informative communication about sex notwithstanding, teenage girls and unmarried Palestinian women in Israel today acquire knowledge about sex in general, and about their own sexuality in particular, in books or films. Less intentionally, adolescent girls and unmarried women utilize a plethora of indirect cultural practices, such as sexual jokes, mimicry of exaggerated sexy body language, and sensual dancing in women's gatherings, through which they legitimately express and experience feminine sexuality. Quite a few of the women who assured me that they had had no sexual experience, and had no intention of getting any before they married, nonetheless kept up a highly sensual appearance, wearing high heels, tight clothes, and elaborate makeup. Even without direct heterosexual intercourse, unmarried women do not necessarily remain sexually ignorant or alienated from their own sexuality. Instead, the level of repression of the libido differs among them.

In contemporary Israeli-Palestinian culture a female's virginity is not merely a physical condition but also an emotional and a cognitive one (see also Parla 2001; Buitelaar 2002). Moreover, it is a continuum of purity, rather than an either/or state. If ideally a virgin is one who not only keeps her hymen intact but one whose sexual desire is still dormant, and who is ignorant regarding sex and sexuality, then not all unmarried women who keep their hymens unbroken necessarily remain virgins in every sense. To the extent that these women do obtain knowledge about their bodies and their sexuality and do let themselves be sexually aroused—through contact with men or women, through movies, masturbation, or daydreaming—they actually stop being genuine virgins. The differences of opinion as to whether bleeding on the wedding night constitutes a sufficient indication of virginity reflects the gap between formal knowledge, which defines virginity as a merely physical matter, and the practical knowledge that virginity (and sexuality) has also emotional and cognitive aspects.

#### INFORMAL ACQUISITION OF MATURE FEMALE SEXUALITY

While it is likely that most unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women try to remain virgins in the narrow physical sense, many of them still undergo sexual awakening to some degree. In adolescence, for example, many girls manage to evade their parents' strict control and engage in relationships with boys their age or slightly older. When the boys are their classmates, these engagements usually take the form of exchanging letters and phone calls, and stealing secret meetings during school



activities. These relationships remain platonic or include very limited physical contact, due to the girls' self-policing and the lack of private space. In a radically different mode, young men in their early twenties may adopt a very noisy style when courting adolescent girls. Such young men drive their cars, radios blaring, around the girls' homes or schools; they may whistle at them on the street or congregate in gangs near their doorsteps. Some girls clearly enjoy the attention, and while they may risk punishment at home they are rewarded within their cohort for being popular.

Secretive and delicate, or overt and aggressive, the effects of such engagements on the sexual awakening of adolescent girls vary. With many, the sensual effects are limited, as girls voluntarily channel their romantic energies away from eroticism and indulge instead in their sense of being beautiful and sought after. This is an outcome of the split construction of female sexuality outlined earlier, which directs girls' romantic fantasies into preoccupation with status, while effectively keeping their erotic inclinations blocked. At the same time, some of these physical contacts do become more explicitly sexual and do arouse the girls' sexual desire. When does a romantic involvement become sexual? And can sexual awakening take place without it? Notwithstanding the importance of maintaining virginity, unmarried women extend along a continuum between strict sexual dormancy and full sexual awakening. There are women who block the entire issue of sexuality from their consciousness, while other women have had full sexual and romantic relationships and have become closely attuned to their sexual desires. The majority are located between these two poles. Among unmarried women indirect sexual practices entice many to mature sexually, to assume womanhood.

For example, a sexually dormant 30-year-old unmarried Muslim woman, Yusra, claimed she felt no sexual desire because for her the subject had remained "closed" (*musakkar*) ever since childhood, when her mother instructed her that sex was forbidden according to religion. This woman described herself as "a serious and somewhat stubborn girl" who did not fool around, so that everybody in the neighborhood knew that she was a virgin and so her father and brothers could have full faith in her. Yusra's body language accorded with her self-description. Her dress style, while secular, was modest (she customarily wore long pants and long-sleeved blouses with a high neckline) and, as she pointed out, she never wore makeup. Other unmarried women also said that they felt no sexual desire because they had had no experience, and asserted that sexual needs grew with experience. Much like Yusra, Rose, the 32-year-old Christian woman introduced earlier, described herself as "a totally straight girl" who had never received as much as an innocent caress from a man. Like Yusra, Rose was devout in her religion, yet despite the similarities in their verbal presentations of self, the overall impressions that the two women gave were different. Rose wore elaborate makeup, tight and more revealing clothes, and high heels. As a Christian, she proudly considered herself more Westernized than her Muslim neighbors and regarded her dress style as a sign of modernity and sophistication.



These nuanced differences, which probably emanated partly from the particular personalities and body types of the women, reflect a fine line between sexual innocence and sexual awakening, and moreover a certain ambiguity in the local interpretations of virginity. Yusra stated time and again that her parents trusted her and that neither they nor she were the least worried that she had remained unmarried. But she also said that she was receiving messages from friends and family that it was about time she stopped thinking about men as brothers (i.e., in an asexual manner), and that she should try and be more playful. It seems that at the same time as mothers teach their unmarried daughters not to give in to sexual temptation, they instruct them on how to beautify themselves and explicitly encourage them to adopt a feminine and seductive body language, especially after they reach puberty.

Like body language, heterosexual encounters spread over a wide range of emotional and physical involvement. In addition to adolescent experiences between classmates and neighbors, some older unmarried women engage in flirtations with male strangers during vacations abroad. Some unmarried women over the age of twenty become involved in long-term romantic relationships with men which involve sexual intercourse. Mostly such relationships are not acknowledged by the women's families and neighbors. In some cases they develop into marriages, but the absence of an engagement puts the woman at risk, for in case of a breakup she, and not the man, may suffer from social sanction. When a relationship does not result in marriage, as happened with Hiyām, the woman's chances of marrying decline.

Losing virginity is related to vaginal penetration, yet it cannot be reduced to it. While the hymen continues to be a central symbol in the construction of the sexual morality of unmarried women, it also becomes increasingly more "flexible," to borrow the local image. During this research, a 30-year-old unmarried male, Eyād, related the affair he was having with a 25-year-old woman, Nihāya, who had come from a village to study in the city where he lived. Finding her very attractive, Eyād thought he was in love, but when he learned from Nihāya that she had had two sexual partners before him, he acknowledged that this prevented him from considering her as a future wife. To show him that he meant more to her than her previous lovers, Nihāya allowed him be the first man to penetrate her. Although Eyād was impressed by the act, saying, "She granted me the right to be her first," he still could not regard her as having been a virgin.

Nihāya's behavior indicates that she is a woman who wants to enjoy her sexuality. Yet her hymen still carried a residual symbolic value; she had "saved" it for the man she truly loved. According to the local cognitive definition of virginity, Nihāya was already not a virgin even before she was penetrated, which is how Eyād treated her. However, in letting Eyād know that she had had sexual engagements that did not include penetration, she knowingly manipulated her sexual image. She might as well not have told him about her previous experience, as other women in similar situations choose to do.

The same residual symbolic value of the hymen is found in the behavior of women who intentionally separate breaking their hymen from the emotional value



that they relate to sex. One woman described a two-year love relationship she had had with a man with whom she enjoyed sex very much, but actually remained a technical virgin throughout. After the end of the relationship, which had taken a heavy emotional toll on her, she had a brief affair with a man she did not love, and was penetrated for the first time. "I didn't care much about Ibrahim," she said. "I just wanted to get it done with once and for all." Another woman said that she had broken her hymen herself a few years before she had sex for the first time. Clearly, the hymen as proof of virginity has been significantly devalued, yet remains tangible proof that women may use in diverse forms.

### NONBIOLOGICAL MOTHERING

Bearing children out of wedlock is nonexistent among Palestinian women in Israel, except for a handful of cases on the margins of the community. Yet mothering is not only about giving birth. As mentioned, the reproductive component of female sexuality is seen as an innate drive (women are said to have a longing to bear and to raise children) separate from intercourse. Of course, the expectation is that this drive should materialize, yet it is expected to thrive even without a woman actually giving birth. A woman who is childless may be pitied but she is not deemed morally flawed. Unmarried women are expected to be loving and nurturing toward children in general, and many develop strong attachments to their nieces and nephews, especially if they happen to share the same residence with their married brothers, which is common.

Initiation to adult femininity in Israeli-Palestinian culture occurs in three ways: vaginal penetration, which is expected in marriage, child bearing, or sexual awakening. Unmarried women are abjured from taking the first two paths. Vaginal penetration for such women is strongly condemned. When it does occur, it may yield harsh consequences, from humiliating divorce promptly after the wedding night, to threats and even actual murder by blood relatives (Glazer and Abu-Ras 1994; Espanioly 1997; Hasan 1999). Even aside from these extreme measures, loss of the hymen can seriously damage the reputation of unmarried females and hamper their chances of marriage. This is often enough to deter many from engaging in intercourse, or to push them into a costly and painful hymen-repair operation. The third path, on the other hand, provides generous opportunities for women, married or not, to express and experience their sensuality. This is true not only of all-female gatherings, where female sensuality in dance and jokes is encouraged. Nor is it rare in mixed company, such as wedding celebrations, except within strictly religious circles. In local discourse, female sexual awakening is not as explicitly a path to womanhood as is marriage or biological motherhood. For the most part, female eroticism is left alone: women dance and laugh, they gossip about one another for doing so, yet continue to do it. Alternatively, they are given to understand that it is immoral, too modern, or non-Islamic, with instructions to steer clear of it.



The sexual behaviors of unmarried women described above mostly follow this third path, which is ambiguous and therefore rich with possibilities. While perhaps most unmarried women take care to remain virgins in the narrow physical sense, many of them do undergo various degrees of sexual awakening. Through acceptable forms of sexual maturation they constitute themselves as women de facto, within a community that labels them “girls.” As Nādia, 38 years old and married, put it, “I have some married friends who until this day cannot tell if they’ve had an orgasm or not, although they already have several children” (see also Vieille 1978; Shokeid 1982; Al-Khayyat 1990; Accad 1991; Kayir 2000; Sa’ar 2000:ch. 4; Rubenberg 2001).

#### BETWEEN VIRGINS AND WOMEN: COPING WITH LIMINALITY

In “What Is a Sexual Act?” Maurice Godelier (2003) asserts that not all erotic acts are necessarily regarded as sexual, including acts that in other cultural contexts would be seen as indisputably so. Often, in the transformation of erotic acts into what a culture considers sexual acts, the pleasure element is sacrificed. In the sexual initiation that Israeli-Palestinian females need to undergo in order to become women, erotic arousal is not imperative. It is of course possible, and within certain contexts may also be sanctioned as legitimate. However, it is also framed as negative and dangerous, which consequently leaves it mostly in the shade. Local ideas about the activation of feminine sexuality are contradictory. On the one hand, preoccupation with the virginal hymen suggests that vaginal penetration more than anything else is the critical element that leads to feminine sexual awakening. On the other hand, demands that girls refrain even from platonic attachments to boys or men suggest local acknowledgement that erotic arousal may actually occur regardless of physical contact. Concomitantly, Israeli Palestinians display a wide range of reactions to the heterosocial behavior of unmarried women. Not infrequently, these women may be locked in at home, have their schooling interrupted, and even be threatened with death for so much as the suspicion of having had a romantic involvement. At the same time, other unmarried women manage to create for themselves significant leverage to move about, socialize, and sexualize. Therefore the issues of who is a sexually active woman, and by extension, as entailed by the girlish framing of unmarried females, who is a woman, have a wide array of perceptions within the same cultural setting.

In two focus groups held in a village community, some 25 unmarried females in their twenties testified to leading extremely confined lives. All were Muslims, some Bedouin and mostly *Fallaheen* (traditional farmers), and all had an incomplete high-school education. To be trusted, they said, a girl must inform her parents of her every move. She is routinely questioned about her whereabouts, and is punished for the slightest suspicion. “They’re afraid that if the girl goes out to the street she might meet this or that person and talk to them, say, or that she might be there with a girl who’s no good. So *khalās* (that’s the end of it), they don’t trust her to go, say, to a



faraway place . . . or to sleep over away from home." For the speakers, who mostly reinforced one another's descriptions, this was the only way of living. "There are, of course, some deviant cases," they said, "of girls who have no restraints."

Interestingly, a woman from a neighboring village described a radically different lifestyle. While her conduct would probably be classified by the first group of speakers as extremely unrestrained, she was by no means labeled by her relatives as deviant. At 40, Rana, a Muslim, was living in an extended household with her married brothers and aging parents. With an academic degree and earning a good salary (average in Israeli terms but much higher than any salary the participants in the focus groups ever stood to earn), Rana traveled in her car all across the country. Visiting me in Jaffa one evening, she accepted my invitation to stay over for the night. At 10 p.m. she called her mother to let her know, "because she always gets so worried about road accidents." Asking for permission was not an issue. In the lengthy conversation we had that night, Rana told me about an affair she had had with a man from Ramallah (West Bank), which ended because she was not happy with the sex. Rana reckoned that he had some kind of a sexual problem, an impression that was reinforced by the fact that he had never married. The man kept pursuing her and even told her his woes. "He expected my sympathy, but I told him that I was very sorry. Although I could understand his predicament sociologically, I was not willing to sympathize with him. If he wants psychotherapy he can come to me and pay me 250 shekels an hour, instead of dragging me all the way to Ramallah."

Israeli-Palestinian society, while diverse, is relatively small and spread across a fairly narrow range of class differences. One salient attribute in Rana, Hiyām, and numerous other Christian and Muslim unmarried women with similar lifestyles is their high level of education and their independent income. Although they are relevant, education and earning by themselves are not enough to produce radical effects, since these women still live firmly within their society. Quite a few highly educated unmarried women are actually chaste and restrained. Conversely, some working-class or poor unmarried women also engage in sexual relations. Notably, they differ from the former in being marginalized and half-abandoned by their families, who are themselves broken and disempowered.

The coexistence of radically different patterns of sexual behavior is made possible by the structural contradictions that characterize Israeli-Palestinian life, combined with the agency of individual women and individual families. As mentioned, Israeli Palestinians are collectively marginalized and suffer from multiple forms of discrimination. Yet as citizens of the state, they do have some rights, although restricted, which individuals in certain situations may actually translate into significant advantages. Women's schooling, their acquaintance with the Hebrew language, their bureaucratic and consumer skills, and their incorporation into paid labor have enriched and diversified their options. While labor force participation of Israeli-Palestinian women remains very low compared with Israeli-Jewish women (Kraus and Yonay 2002) or even with women in neighboring Arab countries (Israel,



Central Bureau of Statistics 2002), among those who are employed, professional women predominate. Unmarried women in particular are even more likely than others to be employed, as their paid work does not conflict with their motherly and wifely duties. These liberating effects are enhanced by the attainability of consumer goods, such as private cars or mobile phones, which have boosted women's freedom of movement. As against these opportunities, women's lives are encumbered by several overlapping patriarchal mechanisms. Inside Palestinian society the family, and particularly the clan system (*hamāyil*), are oppressive to women. Outside it, the Israeli state, with its military-political elite and hypernationalistic civil culture, produces an articulation of gender and ethnic discrimination (Berkovitch 1997; Fogiel-Bijaoui 1997). Last, Palestinian nationalism constitutes yet another patriarchal layer. The seemingly daring behavior of some unmarried women, therefore, represents neither an aberration nor a linear improvement in the overall status of Israeli-Palestinian women. Instead, it stems from the openings created by the structural contradictions that characterize the life of their community.

Besides these broad social conditions, the sexual trajectory of a woman is also influenced by her particular familial condition, and how she herself maneuvers in it. Some of the poorer and less educated women are free from familial control since their families are already broken or dispersed. These women often live on the margins of the community, commonly in ethnically mixed urban neighborhoods. For them, noninterference tends to represent neglect and loneliness rather than freedom. Conversely, some of the educated women who allow themselves to undergo sexual awakening enjoy the love and support of close relatives. Others still have had to "educate" their parents and siblings, as they put it. It is notable that some of these women turn their living within extended families to their advantage. For example, as they live at home and do not spend money on rent, they can use their wages to keep a car and travel. Not having children also facilitates their economic well-being. In other words, the restrictions that could confine them most (remaining "daughters" in their parental home and not becoming biological mothers) become economic advantages. This by no means is a certain development, as families are quick to demand the labor and income of unmarried women, expecting them to care for the sick and the elderly and to hand over their salaries to a more senior member of the household. It takes assertiveness to resist such pressures.

Unmarried women can determine their status within the extended household in creative ways (Sa'ar 2000:ch. 5). The more they manage to keep their earnings for themselves and avoid working for the family for free, the more they stand to gain respect and freedom. On the other hand, the more they succumb to their relatives' demands with money and labor, the more likely they are to become exploited, marginalized, and confined, as the cases of Hiyām and Na'ima indicate. One sister has cultivated prominence and a leadership position, while leading a sexually permissive life. The second has remained a girl or daughter, in the double sense of sexual dormancy and a subordinate social presence.



Beyond the question of gender morality, unmarried women, through their diverse lifestyles and sexual behaviors, also embody the preoccupation of their community with issues of collective identity. These are locally competing concerns with modernity (Kanaaneh 2002) and with national survival. The hoary rationale of family honor is explicitly expressed in the narratives of the village women interviewed in the focus groups. This morality often assumes a contemporary undertone, as in the labeling of certain behaviors and skills of unmarried women as being “too much,” which represents a collective sense that some balance has been lost. Conversely, in line with the individual advantages that some members of the community extract from the extant contradictory living conditions, manipulations of the virginity norm are sometimes infused with modern values of individuality and privacy. For example, the sexually liberal lifestyles of some unmarried women, however obvious, tend to go unmentioned. The women themselves are never completely open about their connections, nor do they care to conceal them. Instead of attempting explicitly to subvert the code of female chastity, they claim a right to privacy, thereby preventing people from asking about their whereabouts. Buitelaar (2002) reports remarkably similar approaches to virginity among unmarried Muslim women of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands. Another example of employing modern values in the context of female sexual morality is the popular reluctance, in the name of scientific knowledge, to consider bleeding as a proof of virginity.

Compared to women who remained unmarried in previous generations, the people represented in this study have better chances of becoming self-supporting, of moving about freely, and of creating and maintaining a social circle independently. Whether they articulate it in this way or not, in many cases the women represented in this study do not marry because they have the option not to settle for what they consider an undesirable marriage. While many of them abide by a general image of *banāt*, albeit stretched and manipulated, some nonetheless shed the appearance of childish-virginal daughters and assume instead the appearance of mature and admired women. As such, they are walking provocations, attracting suspicion and no small amount of aggression. Yet many also manage to gain exceptional degrees of respect and appreciation. Relatives and nonrelatives come to them for advice, appeal to them to take up managerial positions or leadership roles, and make a point of inviting them to family and social gatherings.

This is the liminal potential. Unmarried Israeli-Palestinian women fall outside the norm, thereby reinforcing it (through their prolonged state of *binet-hood* they confirm the tenet that a female must marry and procreate in order to become a woman), but they also embody the possibility to change it. The various strategies that unmarried women utilize to cope with their marginalization sometimes develop into experiments with alternative paths to adult femininity. This form of gender performativity, like the liminal space in which it takes place, is historically situated. Its dual reproductive and innovative outcomes are responding to the particular historical context in which collective subordination is intertwined with significant opportunities for personal advancement.



## NOTES

1. This study of unmarried Palestinian women was conducted between 1997 and 1999 in Jaffa, with additional visits and interviews in several rural communities in Israel. Interviews were conducted with 25 individual unmarried women, as well as 50 participants in three focus groups, and with other individuals, including notables of the community. I also engaged in participant observation in community and family life.

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2. Although demographers (Dixon 1971; Lewin n.d.) use 25 as the age from which a woman is considered unmarried, many girls begin feeling that they suffer a stigma soon after they reach the age of twenty. In fact, twenty and 22 are the median marriage ages of Muslim and Christian women respectively. Nonetheless, respondents in the community varied with regard to the starting age, and 25 figured in several answers as the upper limit at which a woman can risk remaining unmarried and not be stigmatized.

3. According to the 1995 National Population and Housing Survey, 26.4 per cent of Muslim women and 32 per cent of Christian women in the 25-34 age group delayed marriage until age 25, with 12 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively, remaining unmarried between 35 and 39. These figures were not radically different for older generations (Lewin n.d.: table 3). Regarding the lives of several aging unmarried women in the West Bank city of Nablus, Moors (1995) clearly connotes a constant and not unusual category. Lastly, Fleischmann (2003) tells of numerous unmarried women among the educated class of Palestinians during the first half of the twentieth century.

4. According to the 1995 national Population and Housing Survey (Israel, Central Bureau of Statistics 1998), 79 per cent of Muslim women and 76 per cent of Christian women in the 25-29 age group were already married. In the 40-49 age group, 93 per cent of Muslim women and 86 per cent of Christian women were married at least one time.

5. Similar operations are reported in Morocco (Mernissi 1982), Egypt (Saadawi 1990), Naples (Goddard 1987), and Turkey (Cindoğlu 2000), and probably exist in other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries.

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