

Middle East women: liberation and social revolution

by Neda Azad

Much has been said about the numerous obstacles Middle Eastern women face in their journey through three prisons: the father's house, the segregated school, and the husband's confine. But there are times—revolutionary times—when Middle Eastern women crack these threefold prisons. They begin to break the walls of illiteracy, total economic dependence, hunger and multiple religious and sexist laws such as "honor" killings as well as physical and mental abuses towards "daughter-producing" women.

It is these historic periods—when in the struggle for national liberation the woman also raises the banner of her liberation—that we want to discuss, taking up at one and the same time three movements as representative: Palestinian, Iranian, and Algerian women. We as well want to see how the struggles of these women relate to the Women's Liberation Movement internationally. This is particularly pivotal because we are within what even the United Nations has been forced to designate as the International Women's Decade.

Women and the Palestinian Movement: living contradiction?

Perhaps nowhere more sharply than with the Palestinian question, do we find the necessity of penetrating the conflicting currents and necessary interrelationships of competing nationalisms, of class, and of woman as revolutionary force.

Last July's Copenhagen conference—the U.N. mid-decade conference on women—will throw some illumination on these conflicts. There the delegation of women sent by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), far from raising issues of women in the Middle East, especially within the liberation struggle for a Palestinian nation, confined itself to presenting that old resolution on "Zionism is racism!" which was then ratified by the conference.

They allowed themselves to tail-end that male-dictated resolution which in no way solves any of the issues facing today's Women's Liberation Movement, instead of allowing the universal demands of that Movement to help pose a way out of the Middle East maze. By asking themselves: "Where do we begin now that every one of us is oppressed as a woman—whether we are in a liberation movement or live in a 'liberated country'?" "How do we as feminists pose a new alternative which will encompass the liberation of all, including the Palestinian women?"

Indeed this became clear when the same delegation of women vehemently denied that the right of the Palestinian woman to control her own body was even an issue. Leila Khalid, a member of the PLO delegation, spoke as follows: "It is not a priority to speak about abortion . . . every society has its own priorities. We don't think it matters to think about feminist problems."

But there are Palestinian women who are raising questions other than "anti-Israel." Raymonda Tawil, a Palestinian journalist, participant and organizer of numerous strikes and sit-ins against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, was very bitter about the Copenhagen conference, which she said had nothing to say on the oppressions of women. In her book, *My Home My Prison*,² after speaking of the oppressions of Arab women, she questions whether there will be the liberation of Palestinian women after the independence of Palestinians, saying, "What (is) the point of striving for freedom for my people if our struggle did not bring freedom to women, indeed to every individual." She never forgets that, "I am fighting a double battle

against repression: I (am) fighting for the freedom of my people and simultaneously for my emancipation as a woman."

Tawil has no illusions about the alleged equality of men and women in Israeli society and points to the sexual division of labor in that country, asking why the Israeli woman soldier, this symbol of equality, is the one sweeping the offices? Unfortunately, however, she does not also question the class contradictions within the Palestinian society.

We cannot here follow the decades-long conflicts and similarities between Jewish and Palestinian nationalisms in the post WWII world, including Israel's role as an occupier nation since the 1967 war.³ Instead we want to concentrate on Palestinian women who not only suffer from a national discrimination between Jews and Arabs, but also face an inferior and underprivileged status within their own people.

Today Palestinian women have become in a sense "proletarianized" through the occupation process.⁴ They

form a labor force in textile and food processing industries, and in agriculture. Becoming a wage laborer has meant a certain economic independence, and the beginning of the breakdown of the *Hamoulah*—the extended family,⁵ but also meant that the women of the West Bank and Gaza have both demonstrated against the occupation, and have begun to speak of the sexism in the Palestinian Movement.

The high birth rate is considered to be a weapon against "Zionism," and while Palestinian women have been allowed to enter the struggle for national liberation, their speaking out for new man/woman relations and against the traditional roles of women is often attacked as "misguiding the movement from the struggles against 'Zionism,'" or even itself labelled "Zionist."

As one Algerian woman active in the Palestinian resistance movement writes, "For them (the men) the only worthwhile issue is the Palestinian struggle against Israel and they are unwilling to put any effort into the liberation of Palestinian women. Why? . . . Without this struggle Palestinian women could end up in the same condition as Algerian women. Today Algerian women are still in their homes, just like my mother, like my grandmother."⁶ This is really the crux of the matter, not only for the Palestinian women, but, as we shall see, in Iran as well.

Iran: Women in the Crucible of Revolution and Under the Whip of Counter-Revolution

None can doubt the great revolutionary achievements of the Iranian women, whether we look at the 1866-11 revolution where the women formed their own secret Anjumans (soviets), and founded a weekly newspaper for women called *Danesh* (knowledge), or whether we look at the 1978 revolution and the overthrow of the Shah, where numerous women's committees and publications for women sprang out in opposition to the suffocation imposed during the Shah's time.

But against this we must face soberly the truth that by the second anniversary of this most recent revolution, women have been confronted not only with the symbolic subjugation of the chador (forced veil), but with their actual subjugation as well. Lowering of the marriage age to 13 for girls, institution of the one-sided divorce, as well as official legalization of polygamy and elimination of integrated schools, are only some of the many laws which have been instituted to attempt to push women back some 1,000 years.

Now, under the anti-imperialist banner of the host-age crisis—which was in reality a power struggle between the clergy and the civilians, rather than against either capitalism or U.S. imperialism—the women watched the imposition of the new reactionary Constitution.

It is a constitution which calls the "primary task of women raising of children," includes a set of laws which to a great extent deny a woman the custody of her children in case of a divorce, and literally regards her as "half a man" in every legal and religious principle.⁶

However the shock has not only been these counter-revolutionary moves of the government, but also, and even above all, the attitude of most of the Left which has increased its distance from the women's movement as the reactionary government has tightened its grip.⁷ Some of the Left, including the Fedayeen organization, somewhat supported the March 8, 1979 demonstration when, for five days the women came to the streets, and chanted "We didn't make a revolution to march backwards."

But in November, 1979 the majority of the Left ignored the first Iranian women's convocation. The Fedayeen even arranged a competing rally. And finally, the July, 1980, spontaneous demonstrations of the women against the enforcement of the head scarf for government workers, were attacked by most of the Left, which called them "bourgeois" and "reactionary" as well as "chaotic," since they were not led by a party.

The truth is that far from being reactionary, the women—from very young high school women to workers, students and mothers—have been involved in numerous demonstrations, strikes and sit-ins which have continued to this date.

The Kurdish women, who have formed their own organization (The League of Revolutionary Women of Kurdistan), have not only been in the forefront of the fight against the Iran and Iraq aggressions, but have also continued to challenge the sexism of the Kurdish movement which tries to limit their participation in the struggle.⁸

That the Left should have such a sexist attitude tells much of the bankruptcy of thought which passes for Marxism in these organizations, including their "relation to women's liberation."

In a series of articles recently published by one Left Iranian group, Peykar, the leadership advises readers not to organize women either as an autonomous women's group or around concepts such as women's oppressions and other feminist issues, but rather to concentrate only on the issues of fighting imperialism and abolition of class society. Indeed, the party paper discourages its membership from agitating around illiterate mothers (housewives) as it argues that they are most concerned with their oppressions as women, and do not wish to postpone a discussion of these demands, as the vanguard party wants, until the day after the socialist revolution!

As if Marxism and feminism are sitting on two different poles, every party finds its utmost task to set itself up as a mediator to make sure "too much" feminism does not get in the way of "Marxism." This is true not only of the Left organizations which reduce women's liberation to *potat sevan* or eight on the agenda, but also of many different independent women's organizations.

In Iran, under the title "theoretic questions on women's liberation," Lenin's dialogue with Clara Zetkin after the 1917 revolution is printed and reprinted as evidence that questions of sexuality and new man/woman relationships may not be brought up by the women's committees and that instead, the emphasis should be on the class struggle and at best, striving for equality of men and women after the revolution. Alexandra Kollontai, the Russian revolutionary, is praised because in spite of her devotion to feminism she followed the party line and emphasized the necessity for reproduction among Russian women in 1921.

Rather than taking the dialogue between Zetkin and Lenin as the point of departure for today, we need to recreate the dialectic of liberation with women's liberation as an integral part of it for our time, just as Lenin did for his time when he singled out the movements of the national minorities for self-determination. We need to realize that in our decade, "genuine Marxism has feminism within!" and genuine feminism finds its most critical, that is revolutionary, expression within Marxism.⁹

One way of seeing what happens when you subordinate women's liberation to the struggle as a whole, stands out glaringly in the still unfinished revolution in Algeria.

Algeria: Unveiled and Re-veiled

As against the beautiful descriptions by Frantz Fanon in *A Dying Colonialism* of the revolutionary transformation which took place in the life of Algerian women when they became participants in the national liberation movement and began to include demands for their liberation as well, the Front for National Liberation (FLN)—which was neither grounded in a full revolutionary theory that would include woman as a revolutionary force, nor had any clear vision as to what type of a society it wished to create once the colonizer was overthrown—made "national heroines" out of women, yet asked them to limit their participation in the struggle "within the context of traditional Islamic family life."

In contrast there have been Algerian women who raise the question of extending the revolution beyond narrow nationalism.

Fadela M'rabet, an Algerian feminist who comes from a family of Ulama (elders of Islam) and is a writer who had a program on Radio Algiers for women, is among the many women who bitterly attack the narrow religious concept of women's development and strive to extend the unfinished revolution of Algeria by emphasizing that just as Algeria was once a colony for the French, so women remain a colony which exists for the good of men.

M'rabet points out that "The bourgeoisie in pretending to maintain the oppression of women seek in reality to perpetuate the oppression of other men." All of which, she adds, "takes place under the cloak of Islam or its variants, 'sacred tradition,' 'glorious past'."

In her quest for a theory of revolution, she rejects the concept of "evolution" of women's role in the context of the Islamic society, "which one has never taken the trouble to define, but has on the contrary tried to obscure."

Rather than relegating the struggle for women's liberation to the day after the socialist revolution, or speaking of a narrow feminism within the bourgeois context which strives for the advance of women without at the same time pushing to change society as a whole, she speaks of a revolutionary feminism, saying, "Women's liberation is not a problem which can be viewed in isolation. It is part of the whole in which it is implicated and which in turn conditions that whole."

The stopping of the revolution and the re-veiling of Algerian women opened a new chapter in women's struggles for liberation. In 1965 more than 15,000 women demonstrated against the enforcement of the veil. A spirit was kept alive, whether we look at the large mobilization of women who organized sit-ins in universities to protest the adoption of the retrogressive family codes in 1972, or today, as women continue to

participate in public demonstrations and strikes to protest both class exploitation and sexism.

In a leaflet which was distributed at the University of Algiers, and which was addressed to the Iranian women who were challenging the enforcement of the veil on March 8, 1979, the Algerian women wrote, "We are disturbed by what is being done to Iranian women. These women raised their voices in revolt, but now the new government is trying to silence them. Algerian women also fought as guerrillas in the streets, in the fire of the colonial army. After independence and for the past 17 years the patriarchal power has been working to silence them. This is being done in the name of the thousand-year-old religious principles, in the name of the so-called priorities of a developing nation... in the name of revolution!!! Algerian women join their voices to the cries of Iranian women, who refuse the fascist utilization of an Islamism that is trying to suffocate them..."

The Women's Liberation Movement in the Middle East has reached a most critical point, whether we are dealing with the women of Iran or Algeria who have experienced a revolution and have a land of their own, or whether we look at the Palestinian Movement where, as we witnessed at the Copenhagen conference, the whole women's liberation question was completely evaded.

It is precisely because revolutionary feminism is not fooled by a change in leadership, or forms of property ownership—whether private or nationalized—but rather seeks new human relationships, this essence of Marx's Marxism, where the development of each is the necessary precondition for the development of all, that we must fight in the battle for our own freedom, the day before, the day of, and the day after the revolution.

Indeed we would not only not achieve our liberation, but would in fact leave the whole revolution unfinished, were we not to insist on the liberation of women in the very struggle for national liberation. Our struggle must continue.

1. See "The UN Resolution on Zionism" in the Political-Philosophical Letters by Raya Dunayevskaya, Volume I, News and Letters, 1976

2. My Heart My Power, Raymonda Towil, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979

3. For a full discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict from the 1976 war to the occupation of East Jerusalem, see the series of articles War, Peace or Revolutionary Striving Alliances in the Middle East, by Raya Dunayevskaya. See also Israel and the Arabs (1969) by Maximo Rodinson.

4. See "Proletarianization of Palestinian Women" in MERIP No. 50. MERIP has the most comprehensive reporting on the Middle East. See also the journal Knesset No. 6

5. See Giff Gae Bechtel, December, 1979, "Women in the Palestinian Resistance Movement."

6. For a discussion of the activities of women in the Iranian revolution see my articles in News & Letters, April, 1980 and Jan.-Feb., 1980. For analysis of the Iranian revolution from the overthrow of the Shah through the hostage crisis, see Raya Dunayevskaya's Political-Philosophical Letters, Volume II, especially "Why Philosophy? Why Revolution?"

7. See "The Women's Struggle in Iran" by AZ, an Iranian woman residing in Iran, in Monthly Review, vol. 32, No. 10, (March 8, 1981), for material on the Left organizations' relation to women's liberation. "Most of the Left reduces everything to the meaning of women's oppressions or the substantial role played by culture and ideology. Thus they do not acknowledge the validity of women's struggle for liberation."

8. See Courage, (Germany), July 1980, "Kurdisten."

9. See "Marx's Concept of Women" by Eugene Walker, News and Letters. Also the collection of writings Women as Force and as Reason issued in Paris for March 8, 1980 with an introduction by myself. English and French editions available from News and Letters.

10. The two most recent books Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak, by Elizabeth Watlock Farnis and Esma Gatten Baccigan, and Women in the Muslim World, by Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie include several articles on Algerian women during and after the revolution as well as an article on women in the 1906-17 revolution in Iran. See also MERIP No. 92 which includes a review of these two books.

11. Please refer to "Sexual Class" Working Class, Organization of Peoples Transition Service, Nov., 1979.