

2014

# Agency and Gender in Gaza: Masculinity, Femininity and Family during the Second Intifada, Aitemad Muhanna (Review)

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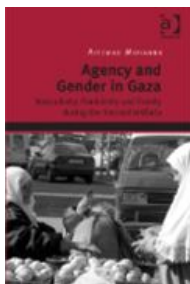
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## Recommended Citation

Campbell, Ian, "Agency and Gender in Gaza: Masculinity, Femininity and Family during the Second Intifada, Aitemad Muhanna (Review)" (2014). *World Languages and Cultures Faculty Publications*. 33.  
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## ***Agency and Gender in Gaza: Masculinity, Femininity and Family during the Second Intifada***

**By:** Aitemad Muhanna

*Agency and Gender in Gaza: Masculinity, Femininity and Family during the Second Intifada*. Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013 (published in hardback in 2012). 208 pp. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-1409454533. Ebk: \$87.96. 666 KB.

Volume: 2 Issue: 4

April 2014

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This volume examines the effect upon two groups of impoverished Gazan women—one of refugee descent and the other native to Gaza— of the dramatic drop in living standards caused by the closing of Israel to Palestinian labor during the Second Intifada (2000-08). While retaining careful respect for the subjective experiences of the individual women she interviews, Muhanna is able to weave anecdotes together with data and the work of other scholars to create an impressive and moving impression of how women of different generations negotiate power with their husbands, children and in-laws in order to make ends meet while maintaining their and their families' honor and dignity as best they can.

Muhanna begins by providing a great deal of welcome context to the issue by describing in very apt prose the history of the conflict within Gaza and the socioeconomic conditions under which very poor Gazans lived before and after the Second Intifada. She summarizes her thesis as follows:

“Men and women use both the structure and ideology of gender to cope with the consequences of chronic personal and familial insecurity. Some coping mechanisms have enhanced the hierarchical structure of the Palestinian family, and some have transcended it, depending on which mechanism has the capacity to achieve the immediate goal of family survival and security from within the existing structure of household and local community gender relations. The Second Intifada has facilitated the fluidity of gender relations in which each gender is reconfigured to resist the threat to family stability.” (p. 12)

But it is in providing the details of these reconfigurations — and more importantly, in lucidly explaining their causes, especially their ideological ones — that Muhanna's text excels. After grounding her study in the methodology of her interviews and in a clear explanation of the applicability of intersectional feminist theory to her work, she opens her analysis by tracing women's agency within their family structure beginning with the mass arrival of refugees from other parts of Palestine after the 1967 conflict. Refugees, unlike Gazan peasants, had no land; the scarcity of housing and especially of real estate among the refugees produced somewhat different patterns among them than among the peasants. Yet, a common traditional family pattern remained: a young married woman would live in the communal home of her in-laws' family, usually under the domination of her mother-in-law as well as her husband. Once her own sons grew to adolescence and her mother-in-law aged, the now-middle-aged woman was able to free herself from domination; once her sons grew and married, she could keep them in her own communal home, now the dominant matriarch. And all of this was done with a great deal of hard work among the women in maintaining the illusion of male supremacy and the seclusion of the family's women.

After 1967, the Israeli labor market was opened, and large numbers of Gazan men moved from the peasantry to the proletariat, becoming comparatively prosperous in the process. For the wives of these men, the additional income often provided the means to move out of the communal home and establish a nuclear family. Becoming the mistress of her own house a generation early was obviously appealing to these women; but Muhanna explains the ideological dimension of this and its comparable importance to considerations of autonomy and economics. She argues that women in Gazan society gained status within the patriarchal order by reproducing the patriarchal order; and being mistress of her own home while a high-earning and conveniently often absent husband enabled her to raise her children, removed from her in-laws, to keep her and gain the high status of a proper housewife — again, all while maintaining the illusion of male dominance. It's all explained so clearly (and with much reference to other scholars' work on the relevant subjects) that *Agency and Gender in Gaza* does an excellent job of showing rather than telling us why it might make perfect sense for example, for a destitute woman to want twelve children.

With the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1993, jobs in the public sector become available to Gazans. This throws an additional layer of complexity into the issue of gender dynamics within the family as educational attainment for her children enters the range of options that a woman might have in negotiating greater power and autonomy for herself or her children. That these women make choices that reify traditional patriarchy is for Muhanna an implicit critique of Bordieu's *habitus*; this is easily the weakest part of the text, in that the critique is only touched upon. It would have been more effective to expand the critique and weave into the narrative an ongoing engagement with Bordieu and

Bordieu scholarship; or perhaps better still, to leave mention of such a critique to footnotes and expand upon it in a separate journal article. But this is very much a minor issue in an otherwise excellent book.

With the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000, the Gazan economy was progressively devastated by Israel's direct military response, its closure of the labor market, its seizure of previously productive Gazan agricultural land and fisheries, and the withdrawal of aid to Gaza by most Western governments and organizations after the Hamas electoral victory. This devastation was profoundly gendered, in that it was men who were left without any means of providing for their families, and women who were left to shoulder the burden; neither gender liked the idea of women going out to seek sustenance for their families, but aid agencies were much more likely to provide aid to women than to men. One primary consequence was that women who had been living in nuclear families were often compelled to move back into their in-laws' communal home, under the thumb of their mother-in-law. This section is where Muhanna makes the most use of her interviews, giving detailed and often heartbreaking stories of the suffering these women underwent, not only to sustain their families in the absence of any kind of suitable work for their husbands, but also in order, once again, to maintain the illusion of male dominance. The interviews enable Muhanna to demonstrate that the ideological need to maintain a plausible façade of male supremacy often outweighed purely socio-economic concerns: many of the women actually preferred their husbands idle, angry and dominant over, for example, taking over housework and childcare duties while their wives worked full-time in petty commerce, aid agency jobs or networking for access to aid coupons. She goes into much detail on the sheer fragility of Gazan masculinity and the efforts undertaken by women to maintain and support their men as dominant, all in the face of the near-total destruction of men's ability to provide for their families after the beginning of the Second Intifada. Muhanna also manages to pull off the very difficult trick of being personally invested in a subject — she herself is from a poor Gazan community and is the widow of a man killed in the uprising — and yet managing to convey its nuances lucidly and objectively.

This book is well worth the time even for the casual reader, but will be of especial interest to those studying intersectional feminism. As an example of allowing poor women of a marginalized group the opportunity to tell their stories, it would suit the efforts of scholars working on poverty, gender, and the effects of war and of modernity on traditional family structures. Muhanna is to be commended for a thoughtful, enlightening and well-constructed work.

