

CONFLICT, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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CONFLICT, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Insights from the West Bank and
the Gaza Strip

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ABBREVIATIONS

Civil Society Organisations	(CSOs)
Development Assistance Committee	(DAC)
European Union	(EU)
International Non-Governmental Organisations	(INGOs)
Islamic Resistance Movement	(Hamás)
Non-Governmental Organisations	(NGOs)
Occupied Palestinian Territories	(OPT)
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	(OECD)
Palestinian Authority	(PA)
Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics	(PCBS)
Palestinian Liberation Organisation	(PLO)
Palestinian National Liberation Movement	(Fatah)
Palestinian Non-Governmental Organisations Network	(PNGO)
United Nation Development Programme	(UNDP)
United Nation Security Council Resolution	(UNSCR)
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	(OCHA)
United Nations Relief and Working Agency	(UNRWA)
United States Agency for International Development	(USAID)
Women's Young Islamic Association	(WYIA)

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INTRODUCTION

The [UNDP \(1994\)](#) defines human security, which is achieved when people can exercise their choices safely and freely and when they can be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today will not be entirely lost tomorrow (pp. 22–34). The Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank cannot plan their own day without any interruption. The Palestinian people are used to the daily lifestyle of suffering and the absence of human security; they have lost their top priority of securing their own basic human needs during the failure of ‘peace process’ and the collective punishment policies exercised by the foreign occupation. The entire society faces now tough challenges including occupation, creeping annexation and covid19. They have lost their own economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, political and human security, owing to the circumstances imposed by the Israeli occupation, lack of freedom, pollution and a devastated economy, the absence of peace and the Palestinian division ([Jad, 2007, 2018](#); [Natil, 2019, 2020](#); [Wildeman, 2019](#)).

Activists’ experience of occupation policies exercises power, which focuses on controlling and disciplining bodies. These policies of violence and control create insecurity in their daily experiences of conflict; however, their peaceful resistance to the occupation can be found embedded within daily life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) ([Ryan, 2016](#)). Ordinary citizens including civil society activists and women local leaders witness an unprecedented state of poor public freedom and socio-political deadlock. They also suffer from ineffective, inefficient and insufficient public policies, which have made their lives much worse at all levels, created by the paralysed political system, social and geographic division, and harsh economic life ([Jad, 2007, 2018](#); [Natil, 2019, 2020](#)). Peaceful civil society activist’s power can also be embedded in non-violent struggle and popular protest despite the fact of the uncertain future of unarmed resistance in the OPT ([Darweish & Rigby, 2015](#)).

In the early months of the 'Oslo Peace Process', many civil society groups established non-government organisations (NGOs) in order to contribute to the 'state-building' as a part of NGOisation development process as Islah Jad (2007, 2018) argues. This state-building process, however, includes the elections, the failure of the peace process and division while civil society organisations' (CSOs') participation in the early days of 'state institution building', hoping for peace and prosperity based on human rights and for democracy, justice and the rule of law (Wildeman, 2019, p. 153). It has been a huge challenge to run community participation programmes in a highly politicised and polarised society since the failure of the Oslo Peace Process in July 2000 (Hanafi & Cuhadar, 2010, p. 207). CSOs have been active contributors to relief, human rights, development and the empowerment process of civil society since the beginning of Palestine cause or the Palestine/Israel conflict (Hanafi & Cuhadar, 2010, p. 211; Natil, 2014, 2019, 2020).

CSOs include a diverse set of organisations, ranging from small, informal, community-based organisations to the large international NGOs working through local CSOs across southern countries (UNDP, 2013, p. 123). With a diverse range of CSOs, objectives and actions that target local, national and international issues, the CSO sector is an expansive terrain characterised by dynamic relationships between agents of action, the causes they serve and the communities that benefit from their activities (Natil, 2020, pp. 10–17). Organisations, such as trade unions or professional associations, for example, prefer to label themselves CSOs not NGOs. CSOs have the capacity to drive innovation and provide humanitarian relief in the face of natural disasters, war and other crises around the world. Islah Jad (2007, 2018), however, argues that Palestinian civil society is largely depoliticised and lost its previous agenda and capacity to organise and mobilise different women's group, for example, to combat occupation. Repressive regimes, however, have been found to control these organisations by imposing a system of dominating financial channels (Weeden, 2015). Natil (2019, 2020) discusses the barriers facing civil society and their abilities to cope with and operate within shifting conditions, restrictive political environments and despite the complexity of the sociocultural and economic context. Occupying the ground between business and government, the CSO sector faces a number of regulatory and financial challenges that affect its overall health and sustainability (Natil, 2020, pp. 10–17).

Although the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has traditionally used the term NGO, NGOs have included participatory elements in their programmes and functions as Bherer, Dufour, and Montambeault (2016) argue. OECD, however, has adopted the definition of CSOs:

[CSOs] can be defined to include all non-market and non-state organisations outside of the family in which people organize themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain. Examples include community-based organizations and village associations, environmental groups, women's rights groups, farmers' associations, faith-based organizations, labour unions, co-operatives, professional associations, chambers of commerce, independent research institutes and the not-for-profit media. (OECD, 2011, p. 10)

In Palestine case, [Jad \(2007, 2018\)](#) argues that:

the rise of NGOs can be seen to have resulted in a shift in power relations from power to women at the grassroots to power over them by the new elite.

This type of NGOs generated conflicts with forms of mass-based organisations over legitimacy, resources and space in public arenas. The NGOisation process in the post-Oslo process led a pressure on women's organisations to shift their role from mobilisation and liberation agenda to a 'state-building' and claiming rights, empowerment and equality as [Jad \(2018\)](#) argues. Is Women's CSOs activism, however, is considered a form of grassroots engagement and a process of 'participatory democracy'? Is active participation in local organisations, student unions, social movements, CSOs and NGOs a form of 'participatory democracy' in responding to the lack of a democratic process in a conflict zone? CSOs always seek to explore a new space for activists' social and political engagement by managing community development and post-conflict reconstruction, as well as improving humanitarian lives. The participatory practices have also expanded in a variety of unexpected public and private spaces. [Hilmer \(2010\)](#) and [Aragones and Sánchez-Pagés \(2009\)](#) discuss the definition and concept of participatory democracy where active citizens have the power to decide on change of their future. CSOs attempt to show the advantages of working for mutual benefit with tangible results between different groups to engage victimised in participating in social and political activities. The participatory process is also associated with the practice of a top-down mechanism conducted to include citizen's engagement and contribution to the public sector as [Bherer et al. \(2016\)](#) argue.

This book seeks to address the following questions: To what extent have the Palestinian CSOs in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank actually succeeded in empowering women's engagement in civil society participation despite the conflict, violence and occupation? What is the role of CSOs in engaging young

women and people in civil society activities? How did CSOs overcome cut of foreign aid challenges? To what extent do internationally sponsored CSOs succeed to promote women's engagement and development, enduring foreign occupation, foreign aid, political division and violence? It provides a specific study on CSOs' contributions to civic engagement, resilience and women's empowerment, despite foreign aid cut and the conflict, violence, instability in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The purpose of this book, in the field of development, peace studies, conflict resolution and conflict strategy, is to explore the learned lessons of resilience and civic engagement, despite the existence of social conservatism and political deadlock. It contributes to the field of development, civil society, the study of politics and international relations, as well as Middle East studies, and provides up-to-date analysis on young women's social and political challenges and lessons. It also examines the impact of the politics on local CSOs and the power and impact on social developments (2002–2020). This research considers the main thematic of CSOs' intervention, sponsored by international donors where the core approach is to study the active engagement of activists with emphasis on participatory process, the freedom of expression and community peacebuilding (Spurk, 2010, pp. 3–26). The study of the challenges facing women in civil society, peacebuilding and development, including active community participation under violence, occupation and the Palestinian division, is one aim of the book. It also examines the essential role and impact of CSOs upon peaceful struggle, community development relief assistance and human rights. These organisations always attempt to respond rapidly to the needs of the population by delivering social, health, cultural and educational services to all sectors of society during the different humanitarian circumstances as Natil (2014, 2019, 2020) discusses.

It gives an overview of recent foreign aid cut to Palestinian in general; however, there are still some international donors as European Union (EU) interested in supporting civil society activities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip despite 'the limits of securitized peace' between Israelis and Palestinians (Tartir, 2018). Jad (2007) argues that international NGOs, foreign states and donors hijacked the national agenda, after the second intifada, and concentrated on a particular set of issues concerning peace building, conflict resolution and related issues. Palestinians have been living in a very dramatic and violent political environment. The Palestinian Authority (PA) was dramatically weakened by Israeli activity, as well as by the deteriorating economic situation. The PA, however, has been unable to respond rapidly to the social and economic demands, and the needs of desperate residents of the OPT while economic empowerment by development aid remains a key

element for employment and financial, and significant impact on an individual's decision-making (Wildeman, 2019, pp. 153–174).

The foreign donors have always the power to 'promote' and 'exclude' their local civil society partners. Challand (2009) discusses the Palestinian civil society and their relationship with foreign donors. There have been, however, diverse set of CSOs working with international organisations and foreign donors to implement civil society activities. This has promoted the CSOs' dependency on international donors in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. These CSOs, however, have been challenged by violence, social context, foreign occupation and conditions, requirements, and shifts of international donors since 1967 (Hanafi & Cuhadar, 2010, p. 211). Foreign aid remains, however, a necessity for effective community programme delivery (Baliamouné Lutz, 2016, pp. 320–341). The example of CSOs' projects funded by EU programmes in OPT is used to clarify this linkage and discussed in Chapter 5. Dalia Hatuqa, however, discusses why some Palestinians are shunning foreign aid. There have been a number of critics and activists who argue that depending on international aid is unsustainable after shifting policies of USAID in 2019 as Besan Abu Joudeh, CEO and co-founder of BuildPalestine, says:

After USAID left, many organisations had to shut down. Our local non-profits should be sustainable, such that the changing political interests or international donors won't cause them to close up shop.
(Hatoqua, 2019)

The critical framework also goes beyond this approach to draw upon the theory of 'participatory democracy' to examine the impact of CSOs' programmes. Bherer et al. (2016) argues that participatory democracy originally involves transformation of the inegalitarian relationships between the state and society. This can be helped to empower citizens in every sphere of their daily lives as work, political institutions, school, university and family. Michels and De Graaf (2010) discuss that the citizen's involvement has a number of positive effects as inclusion, civic skills and virtues, deliberation, and legitimacy. This is a natural process of identification of promising and citizens, who help in empowering networks and cooperation between CSOs working for active participation and engagement in civic actions. The conceptual framework used in this study comes from the notion of building a participatory civil society despite the challenges of violence and shifts of international aid. Theme and theory of 'participatory democracy' is reflected by CSOs' deliveries and intervention to promote a society's values of respect for a change process. Also considered is the existing literature's emphasis on a narrow definition of civil society and citizens' active participation in some

countries, where conflicts shape the social and political context as Paffenholz (2010) discusses civil society and peacebuilding. CSOs' engagement and deliveries sponsored that includes the voices of the most vulnerable are heard in the decision-making process, as an ideal concept of active community participation as Natil (2017, 2019, 2020) discuss.

CSOs' intervention is a participatory process reflected by different mechanisms and processes, for example, through NGOs, universities, public institutions, local councils, political parties and the decision-making process (Hanafi & Cuhadar, 2010, p. 207). CSOs may consider the methodology of active participation that entails understanding the beneficiaries' needs by being on the ground and introducing change incrementally. CSOs' endeavour to make training and campaigning activities is as creative as possible to enhance activists' engagement in community participation actions. This is a framework that has at its core the principles of participatory democracy, when some CSOs ensure that the implementation of activities remains inclusive and as broad-based as possible (Spurk, 2010, pp. 3–26). Francesca Polletta (2016) discusses the participatory enthusiasms of citizen's engagement and the impetus to citizen's engagement. Some CSOs encourage citizen's input at the various phases of implementation of community projects. Aisha Mansour, the leader of Dalia organisation in the West Bank, says:

We work on mobilising local resources for community-controlled development; meaning the community votes for the initiatives they want, what solutions they want to see in that community, and where the small grants that we give should go. (Hatoqua, 2019)

This significant contribution of CSOs is reflected in their capacity to engage in development and change process, and to contribute to long-term changes in attitudes and prejudices and to promote the rights of vulnerable groups while fostering tolerance by applying lessons learnt from other conflicts in the world (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2010, pp. 66–75). Civil society activists are increasingly witness to poor public freedom, socio-political deadlock, narrow civic space owing to controlled political systems and harsh economic life (Natil, 2020). One of the main objectives of CSOs' scope is to stimulate a national debate between local activists and decision-makers to ensure social and economic priorities are met, based on a broad consensus of society (Hanafi & Cuhadar, 2010, p. 211). CSOs also aim at increasing engagement of marginalised and vulnerable groups in implementation of activities as public dialogue and community peacebuilding (Natil, 2014, pp. 82–87).

CSO activists and/or ordinary citizen's attempt to challenge ineffective, inefficient and insufficient public policies while they still have some influence over

processes of change (Paffenholz, 2010). These CSOs have designed actions with the intention of empowering women's equal political participation, of stopping restrictions on public freedom and of protecting women from both political exclusion and domestic violence. Young women's integration into all parts of the participatory process, therefore, is very important, including the reconstruction and rebuilding process following conflict (Potter, 2008, pp. 142–143). Some CSOs identify a list of potential risks including the stances of radical groups for active community participation, which might physically threaten the leaders of civil society actions. CSOs also experience socio-political developments including any threat to civil society from state, grassroots and/or factional actors. The existing political conditions, social barriers and the financial challenges might encounter the actions' implementation (Natil, 2019, 2020). It is important to mention here the history and scope of CSOs since their emergence and their strenuous efforts, CSOs have still drawn criticism from local groups in the OPT, which claim that the programme ignores Palestinian suffering. However, despite these challenges, some local CSOs have sought to implement informal grassroots activities of education including training and awareness of good governance, human rights community peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Hanafi & Çuhadar, 2010, p. 207).

This includes advocating, implementing and enforcing policies and practices to stop this sort of exclusion and marginalisation. CSOs have sought to undertake a series of actions to establish viable grassroots engagement, which reaches local people, enabling marginalised groups to gain a voice. CSOs also attempt to empower civic engagement so that they gain a voice and participate actively in proposing and implementing public policies agenda. Their various missions have emphasised the priorities of civic rights and public freedom (Paffenholz, 2010). Internationally sponsored CSOs, however, deliver to contribute to enhance engagement of the marginalised groups to gain a voice and participate actively in proposing and implementing the public policy agenda (Wildeman, 2018).

Many CSOs' activities aim at rebuilding mutual trust through building capacity, empowering marginalised groups and launching joint development policies and strategies (Paffenholz, 2010). However, CSOs aim at activating grassroots networks to both assist and encourage various groups to support the endeavours of community participation. This also aims at promoting local networks to stimulate a national debate between activists and decision-makers, focussing on the themes of active participation and civic engagement. These activities may also address the internal divisions between the Palestinian factions, rebuilding mutual trust through increasing capacity for conflict

resistance and empowering marginalised young people, as well as launching joint development policies and strategies (Natil, 2019, pp. 24–36). This educates and enhances the capacities of target groups in implementing programmes in various fields including human rights, peacebuilding and good governance. It also includes raising awareness on rights of social and political participation empowerment (Paffenholz, 2010).

Many CSOs have also used creative and innovative operational techniques while responding to the shifting political landscape including the usual crises facing Palestinians (2000–2020). They have been responsive to the changes taking place and, therefore, have been able to adapt themselves to the requirements of new activities during the rise of political and domestic violence in the OPT (Natil, 2019, pp. 24–36). However, this book will present an exclusive and insightful text to explore civil society activists' contribution to community peacebuilding and modes of non-violence, as well as the history and present challenges in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as it is discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. It provides various examples of peaceful activists' empowerment from different locations in the OPT. But *the Gaza* crisis, exception, refugees, open-air prison, resistance, occupation, siege, trauma and persistence have huge influences over ordinary citizen's civic engagement (Tawil-Souri & Matar, 2016).

In addition, this book provides important details of various cases but presents the stories of activists' resilience and active engagement as well, that is, from those who seek to change the social and political circumstances despite an unstable political environment. It focuses on a new approach and the different themes of civil society empowerment, active engagement, participation and leadership from a theories' and practices' perspective, despite the fact of international fund shifts and escalating level of violence, poverty and isolation (Spurk, 2010, pp. 3–26). It also investigates the shifting political landscape after Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections, and the subsequent military confrontation and political division between the Palestinians on the streets of Gaza, which left a huge challenge for civil society operations, particularly from 2006 to 2020. CSOs have employed a new policy of self-accommodation after Gaza's breakaway from the West Bank (2007–2020). Finally, CSOs faced new challenges following the division, the siege on the Gaza Strip and USA cut aid to CSOs and United Nations Relief and Working Agency (UNRWA) (Natil, 2019, 2020; Wildeman, 2019; Zanotti, 2018). This caused enormous destruction affecting citizens, the environment and the future of people's civic engagement and participation.

To identify the various objectives of active community participation and civic engagement activities, it was important to research and examine main tools of intervention used by CSOs. Part of network, CSOs use exchange