



Palestinian Women and the Politics of Invisibility: Towards a Feminist Methodology

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian

Abstract

This paper examines the effect of the politics of militarization and how violent conflict and war like situations can completely silence the voices of a certain segment of the society and render their suffering “invisible” in both the local and global context. In researching this invisibility the hitherto unheard voices of Palestinian women and girls find articulation through a series of case studies. These voices cast light on the unprecedented levels of hegemonic military power that is used to-occupy land, demolish homes, and wage unequal wars between civilians and the state- in this case- the Israeli state. It reflects on how Feminist methodologies can engage in studying the effect of militarization and endless violence. It asks how such methodologies can be developed when violent transgressions, both local and global, work in a spiral and accumulative manner, and when localized contexts and global power politics change rapidly and unpredictably, leaving victims/survivors in a constant state of confusion.

Author Profile

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian is the director of the Gender Studies Program at Mada al-Carmel Haifa, and a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University, Israel. Her main theoretical and research interest has focused on the study of women in conflict zones, mainly in Palestine. Her latest book entitled: “Militarization and Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East: The Palestinian case-study” was published by Cambridge University Press in May, 2009.

Introduction

*The problem is that first my house was demolished and we all moved to live in the school. Then the school was demolished, and I do not know where we should move to and when. Why can't my house be my house, my school be my school, and I live a normal life with an undemolished house and undemolished school?
Hidaya, 15 years old ¹*

*When they demolished my school, I felt that I lost my own home. Maybe the world can't understand, but for Palestinian girls like me, the school is all we have. Girls in the world can go places, visit each other, find the books they want to read, organize field trips with their school and teachers, but Palestinian children have nothing. We the Palestinian girls feel that our schools are the only place we can meet friends, share books, meet, talk, play, sing, write, love... and now they demolished my school.
Nora, 15 years old ²*

*When my house was demolished, the neighbors feared even coming out to help us. They feared fighting back with us, because they knew that they would be next, that they would end up losing their homes. The demolition of my home, the loss of my belonging, of my ability to gather my family under one roof and feel safe, disappeared in seconds, and no one wanted to look at us. They looked at the building. I mean the physical building, as if it is about the walls, the windows and the doors. People maybe felt sorry when they heard the noise during the demolition, but do you think anybody is capable of hearing the demolition of our hearts? Of our dreams? Of our future plans? I guess such voices are never heard. Do you think they even noticed my fear, my agony, my horror? No way. They (fear, agony, and horror) have no voice, no noise, and military occupation has no eyes, no morality, no consciousness, no God.
Salwa, 28 years old³*

¹ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "The Gendered Nature of Education Under Siege: A Palestinian feminist Perspective," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (2008) : 189.

² Ibid, 189-190.

³ Ibid.

The voices cited above are just a small sample of the voices of Palestinian women who are living with the effects of militarization and Israel's demolition policies on their home lives and education. As a result of these policies, Palestinian girls and women have been turned into internally displaced persons (IDPs), made homeless and, as Nora put it, "displaced at home." Women like Nora have experienced the trauma not only of losing their home, but also of losing their sense of safety, security and belonging as a result of the ongoing political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, coupled with the denial of their suffering and silencing of their voices.

This article addresses the "politics of invisibility," and asks questions on how to research and analyze unheard, silenced voices, understand the meaning of the loss of one's home and the loss of access to education and one's right to education, and what kind of methodology one should employ in order to examine ongoing suffering. The voices of Hidaya, Nora and Salwa reveal that the brute force of military power does not perceive or acknowledge their suffering. However what about feminist activists and feminist researchers? Are they capable of developing methodologies that can engage with their suffering, respond to it and investigate its "invisibility"? If so, what kinds of methodologies are called for?

The article discusses the need to develop counter-practices in research methodologies that allow for engagement with indigenous womens' knowledge, experiences and 'ways of knowing' in conflict zones. It reflects on how to visibilize the strength and resilience of women in the midst of daily ordeals and in the context of the global workings of power, unending violence, and the 'technologies' associated with colonialism and militarization. Thus the primary epistemological question raised in this article is whether, how, and when we can engage with and know the "invisible" and invisibilized. In addressing this question the paper draws from two of my studies in Palestine, one that studies militarization, gender and education ⁴ and another that examines the loss of home, and housing demolitions from a feminist perspective.⁵ Both studies

⁴Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Negotiating the present, historicizing the future: Palestinian children speak about the Israeli separation wall," *American Behavioral Scientist Journal*, 49(8) (2006): 1101-1134. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "The gendered nature of education under siege: A Palestinian feminist perspective," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (2008): 179-200. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones: A Palestinian case-study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁵ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Counter-spaces as resistance in conflict zones: Palestinian women recreating a home." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy: An*

challenge perceptions of Palestinian women as victims, transgressors or criminals, by placing their everyday actions in the context of military occupation and oppression.

I examine several intertwined issues and dilemmas pertaining to researching invisibility and developing an appropriate feminist methodology. To begin with, how can we research invisibility, and where should we look for it? Most importantly who are we accountable to when we conduct such research and what is the price of disclosing the experiences of Palestinian women that would otherwise have remained invisible? In other words are we sensitive to our responsibilities towards the women we research, and how we engage with their voices? A related question emerges. What is the price of **not** engaging with women's ordeals and daily lives in a zone of such violent conflict?

My own position, as a Palestinian feminist researcher living in the area of my research, borrowing meanings from the absent voices and ordeals of the invisible and the silenced, compels me to address the methodology that is needed to capture such invisibility seriously. As a Palestinian feminist researcher, a mother of three daughters, a wife, and a member of the Palestinian nation, researching the invisible and invisibilized is a human/political, academic and moral obligation. Researching the invisible, and focusing on invisibility as the main category of analysis, requires that one remains attentive to each woman in the context of her collective and objective experience of militarization and patriarchy, which play out against the backdrop of colonialism, a violent political economy and the inequities of globalization and racism. To do so, researchers must engage with the past (mainly the history of injustice, including the ongoing effects of the Nakba on Palestinians) and how this impacts the lives of women. They must look carefully at the ways in which women locate themselves in the meanings they attribute to their experiences, in the memory of the collective consciousness of their families, community and nation. Building a feminist methodology to research invisibility in conflict zones requires that one be attentive to and be able to document women's resistances and struggles against power relations, in their daily acts, on their way to school, in their work, in their care-giving, and in their strategies of survival.

The paper will conclude by engaging with a dilemma. Should Feminist researchers research all instances of invisibility in conflict zones, especially as in

International Forum, 17(3/4) (2005): 109-141. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2008 and 2009), op. cit.

some cases women's invisibility and silence becomes a mode of survival and a form of self-protection? By foregrounding women's narratives and voices, the paper reveals that information is one of the first casualties in conflict ridden areas, and that the 'other' is further invisibilized as a result both of the inability of the oppressed to come forward and explain their positions and their suffering, and of the ability of those in power to maneuver and silence influential actors in the media, the economy, the law, and even human rights defenders. We also have to be alive to the possibility that information about women's lives, education, health and movement under conditions of vulnerability can well be used as a tool of oppression. The challenge to feminist scholar-activists is consequently to understand the politics of invisibility, particularly viewed through the prism of the trauma of violence and constant loss. The paper suggests that the epistemology of conflict and the politics of knowing in conflict zones take us back to the very personal, as the political, while stressing that the production of knowledge never takes place outside the realm of politics, history and justice.

Spiral Transgressions, Militarization and the Disruption of Everyday Life

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the military rule, and the occupation of additional Palestinian land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, resulted in the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, challenged the question of taking historic responsibility for this creation and opened up the question of the right of return. It further questioned the legitimacy of the Zionist claims that portrays Israel as an exclusive state of the Jewish people, and justifies the constant attacks of the Jewish state on Palestinian's bodies, lives, homes, and homeland. The failure of the peace process, and the failure of the trial to bring an end to the conflict, is rooted - in my belief - in the profound historical insecurity that Israel has about its existence in the region. The issue of security, safety and legitimacy of Israel is rooted in "historical" claims that justify Israel's need to totally control the Palestinians, in order to feel secure. The sufferings of the Palestinian victims are augmented through the injustices inherent in the major settler colonial project, through forceful attacks, displacement, land grabbing, housing demolitions and destabilization of Palestinian lives. This is being done to further the explicit aim of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine.

Our focus is on military attacks on homes and schools and the way in which the Jewish settler colonial project not only destabilizes Palestinians' everydayness, but further works on 'invisibilizing' their just cause. The attack on the Palestinian home, and the Palestinian right to safe education, have not only made many families homeless, but have also disrupted individuals' rights to safety,

and violated their access to education, healthcare, social networks, etc.⁶ I have termed these acts of violence “spiral” transgression, in order to reflect their wide-ranging consequences in the lives of those they affect. Though they may appear on paper as isolated physical events, the trauma cause by a house demolition or a violation of basic rights permeates every aspect of life, irrevocably altering the daily reality of those targeted by this violence. This trauma spirals out and impacts the body, mind, social networks, economic status, etc. of all those involved. For example, when a child’s house is demolished, she or he loses her or his bed, books, toys, clothes, neighbours and friends. Children must accept and adapt to living with relatives, moving to a new environment, place and space, change schools, witness their family’s loss, and relive their trauma through their daily everyday acts. When a woman’s house is demolished, her loss affects her bodily safety, privacy, mobility, lifestyle, welfare, physical health, psychological wellbeing and system of social support. Hence, the attacks on the body, the home and homeland work in a spiral manner, intruding on all aspects of life, and distorting the meaning of an individual life under military occupation.

The militarization of the Palestinian space is a widely-used tactic of the Israeli military, and is reflected in the hundreds of military checkpoints, the attacks on Palestinian educational institutions and house demolitions. For example, since 1999, the Israeli military has destroyed more than 5,200 Palestinian homes, rendering 25,719 Palestinian women, men and children homeless.⁷ It has been a powerful method of imposing Israeli spatial dominance and creating constant chaos that feeds into the spiral manner in which militarized violence functions in the every day life of Palestinians.

The disruption of everydayness and its spiral transgressive power is reflected in 11 year old Mariam’s voice and ordeal. Five years ago, while conducting research in the field, engaging with and interviewing victims of housing demolitions, I realized that one of the houses that had been demolished belonged to Ayman, a former student of mine. A week after my interview with the family, Ayman came to visit me with his wife and daughter Mariam. He wanted my help in finding a way to alleviate the effect of the severe trauma from which his daughter had been suffering following the loss of the family home and their displacement.

Talking to the family, and mainly the little girl, revealed to me the inseparability of the historical denials (global and local) of Palestinians’ right to a home, and the

⁶ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2008), op. cit.

⁷ B’Tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. “Statistics: Destruction of Property,” B/Tselem. <http://www.btselem.org/english/statistics/Index.asp> (accessed February 10, 2010).

ongoing personal trauma of Mariam, Ayman and the rest of their family. Mariam shared with me her story of the demolition of her house with a great deal of despair, pain, tears and anger. She told me how hundreds of police and military officers had attacked her house in Silwan while she was sleeping. She described the big dogs primed to attack her mother, who was resisting the demolition of their home while carrying her younger brother, the loud noise of the bulldozers, the extreme horror that struck her family, and her confusion, loss of the ability to speak and anger towards the injustice. Then she said:

House demolitions have become normal. The bulldozers have become something normal for the Jews. They have demolished so many houses in Silwan...that the demolition of my home is normal, which makes me so upset at the world. Sick, very sick... I feel exhausted.

To hear such reflections and emotions from an 11 year old girl was shocking. But the research in housing demolitions revealed that Mariam's voice was one of the many ordinarily unheard voices that contest the normalization of violence in conflict zones. It calls on us to unpack the violence inflicted against her, and to question the injustice that is reflected in the politics of the invisibility of her loss. It draws our attention to the lack of acknowledgement of her victimization, its 'normalization' and its legalization. Mariam's trauma, though not heard or acknowledged, points to the fact that there is no production of knowledge outside politics and the history of loss, displacement and injustice. Her rejection of the normalization of her trauma, reflected in the politics of housing demolition, highlights the fact that for feminist research the acknowledgment of such hidden suffering is not only a scientific necessity, but also a political obligation.

This obligation takes us away from the positivist approach, which typically poses questions about the legitimacy of the study relating to the 'size' of the sample, its representativeness etc. Instead it leads us to a different approach, one that situates people like Mariam as the source of knowledge. It raises new sets of questions that revolve around acquiring justice and alleviating the pain of those living the 'everydayness' of militarization and violence. Mariam's plight calls for feminist to be attentive to researching invisibility and the invisibilized.

Mariam was persistent in discussing the impact that the noise, the terrorizing bulldozers, and the violent military power had on her small body and young life. She insisted on asking me whether I knew someone who would let her share

with the world her fear of the color yellow, which reminded her of the bulldozers and her sense of loss.

However, her persistent request to share and speak 'truth to power' was interrupted by her mother's anxious interventions. Her mother explained that if Mariam were to speak to a television station, the Jewish state would deprive her of the medical treatment she needed. But Mariam remained adamant in asking me and her father to find a way for her to tell her story. Her father began to make suggestions, but her mother – who was close to tears – stated that she was unable to deal with additional losses that might result from such story-telling. She explained that Mariam's health was what counted now (Mariam developed child diabetes following the demolition of her house), not whether or not the world knew about the effects of the home demolitions. She asked me, "Do you think the world cares about us? Do you think that we are counted as human beings in the world's power formulas?" Despite her mother's words, Mariam insisted, "I want to tell the whole world what they did to us. I want to show them what they did to me."

Mariam's voice, and her family's long history of loss and injustice allow us to reflect on the effect of the global, regional and local denial of the suffering of the unseen and invisibilized. I refer here specifically to the Palestinian case. It requires that we look closely at the way such denial and the workings of power influence the bodies and shapes the lives of individuals and families living in conflict and war zones. It sheds light on the unprecedented levels of hegemonic military power implicated in the occupation of land, and asks whether and how feminist methodologies can be developed when violent transgressions, both local and global, work in a spiral and accumulative manner, affecting everyday acts and movements of individuals. It requires that we understand how and whether we can study "invisibility" through voices of individuals when localized contexts and global power politics change rapidly and unpredictably, leaving victims/survivors in a constant state of turmoil and confusion, and when our research carries political ramifications.

The spiral nature of transgression, as apparent in the protracted suffering of Mariam's family, has affected every aspect of their lives. The family lost her house in Haifa in 1948 (during the Palestinian Nakba), lived thereafter in a state of constant displacement, lost contact with members of their nuclear and extended family, were deprived of social networks, proper access to education, and were left unable to find gainful employment or safeguard the family's wellbeing. The loss of Mariam's family home and the inability of her family to protect her from further trauma – against the backdrop of the world's failure to

bring an end to the continuous violation of Palestinians rights – have worked in a spiral manner to impact Mariam and her family economically, socially and psychologically.

Mariam's losses and their ramification are reflected in, for example, her health situation, and in the heavy medication she is taking. It has a bearing on her eating habits, her body image and her entire future as a woman. For Mariam, being a woman in a patriarchal society such as the Palestinian one, suffering from childhood diabetes affects not only her physical health, but also the degree of her vulnerability as a young woman. It will (as her parents explained) further influence her ability to acquire social and economic safety, access educational institutions, impact her sexuality and affect her prospects for marriage.

Similar findings were apparent when revealing the effect of the loss of the home, due to its demolition, on women's bodily safety, sexuality politics, sense of privacy, and personal future decision. Young women for example explained that they needed to refrain from applying to universities, and accept an early marriage proposal due to the heavy economic burden on their families.⁸ Other's explained that they needed to live with a large number of the extended family, lose their bodily safety, privacy, and sense of protected familiarity following the demolition of their homes. Thus, the spiral manner in which violence functions and affects the lives of individuals living under its shadow has added to the already excessive levels of force, (that have been justified under what I call Israel's security theology) and legitimated disproportionate attacks against Palestinians, disrupting their everyday life and future. The disruption of Palestinian everyday lives be it through disrupting their ability to reach school, to maintain the home as a safe space, to give birth in safety, or to bury their loved ones with dignity, was justified on the alleged need to ensure "security for Israel." "Securing Israel" from the Palestinians, at any cost, and even if it violates international codes of moralities and laws, has become a new religion, a new theology that is above questioning and challenge. Israeli state security, as defined by the Israeli military leadership and political elite, creates a spiral of insecurities and attacks that impinge upon every moment of the lives of Palestinian civilians. Some of these attacks, as Mariam's ordeal exposes, are invisible, uncounted, and denied recognition.

The accuracy, power, and efficiency of the spiral effects of militarized, violent practices, resulted in escalating threats to Mariam's family, including the threat of continuous internal displacement, exile, the loss of home and family, loss of

⁸ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005), op cit.

economic sustenance and the deprivation of the rights to health and education. And yet the mode, structure and epistemic power of this security theology, which renders the human suffering of Mariam and her family invisible, itself remains indistinct and hidden.

Studying the spiral effect of legalized violence (internal displacement, the deprivation of safety and security, etc) and the use of women's bodies and lives to empower colonial bureaucracy and policies will help in the development of a clear, politicized feminist methodology that situates the suffering of women at and as the centre. My argument is that by foregrounding the voices of Palestinian women and girls, as affected by the morphology of the Israeli security theology, and reflected in the attack on the body, home, homeland and life, one could build a critical analytical space from which to theorize a feminist methodology against colonial violence. To further my argument, I draw from women's voices facing housing demolitions, follow by drawing from women's voices facing the violation of their right to education, and conclude with some reflections on feminist methodologies and the dangers of both invisibility and visibility.

Feminist Methodologies and Homes of Invisibility in Conflict Zones

The daily activities of displaced Palestinian civilians are impacted by militaristic policies, manifested among others in home demolitions and the Israeli Separation Wall. As a result of these measures and as affirmed by the women I interviewed, Palestinian women have lost their sense of security, autonomy and economic independence. Women explained that they suffer the constant fear of losing their homes, family members and their ability to provide for their children. The economic strangulation that prevents Palestinians from reaching schools, from finding decent work, and from moving freely within and between their own areas, has had a profound impact on women's bodily safety and lives. Women express fear for their own bodily safety; many of them sleep fully dressed, afraid of abuse and the arrival of bulldozers coming to demolish the house. The voices of Manar, Hoda and others cited below reveal the way in which Israel's militaristic policies have permeated every area of Palestinian life. Manar recounts:

For the past three years, after I wash up at night, I have gone to bed with all of my clothes on... I fear even wearing pajamas to sleep because one never knows what will happen... just ask what happened to Hoda when they demolished their house and you will understand why we sleep with all of our clothes on.

Hoda describes the demolition of her house as follows:

When they demolished the house, I was still in my training suit... I only realized that when I saw the pictures in the newspaper... I was without my veil, and only in my training suit! I will never forgive them for violating my privacy and my right to safety in my own house. Because of that, even today, I refuse to take off my veil and my dishdashah [long dress] when I'm at home in my rented place. Since the demolition last year, I do not know what sleeping means. I feel that they even deprived me of the right to sleep and to sleep safely.

Nawal and Salma tell similar stories of loss and fear. In Nawal's words:

We lost everything – every sense of safety. We can't get water without a struggle, we can't meet our parents without a struggle, we can't sleep, and we can't scream or cry out. And even if we do, no one listens. Even though both my husband and I are Jerusalemites, our children are not, and they do not have I.D. cards... They are all under constant threat. We have lost all sense of safety and security. Sometimes, I feel that being a dog or a cat is safer than being a Palestinian.

According to Salma:

Safety is our main problem. Our children are facing sexual harassment on their way to school each and every day. Three months ago, someone attempted to kidnap my six-year-old daughter, and I had no one to ask for help. They refuse to safeguard the streets and there is no public transportation. Thus, we end up walking in insecure areas and our children end up walking to school on insecure roads.

For Hoda, talking to me about her own hardships was an opportunity for her to share her experiences and ventilate her feelings in her own language, rather than “as a legal expert”. She repeatedly stated that her problem is not the legality or illegality of her demolished home, but rather, “the illegality of my existence... so, do you have a law that checks whether I should exist, whether my family should live or not? Could you all write my questions in your research?”

Hoda, together with her neighbours, posed questions and requested that their questions and worries should be brought before the world. Their constant use of phrases such as, “No one sees us or hear us,” and “we are not considered human beings” led me to a realization of the importance of developing a feminist methodology that engages with invisibility as a major space for understanding the unseen and unheard.

Hoda, like other Palestinian women I interviewed, underscored the fact that the attack on the Palestinian home is a deliberate strategy of war. It changes gender roles, causes physical dislocations and the destruction of social networks, and ruptures the social fabric. It leads to changing gendered roles and intergenerational confrontations, and shakes social values.⁹ In such conditions, cultural roots and religious and spiritual beliefs act as psychological buffers that help women survivors to shape and re-shape their subjectivity in order to reduce risk. The fact that the home (both physically and emotionally) is a site of resistance, survival, and a source of women’s voices, reconstructs new meanings. As Samar stated:

My home was the family home; it was the place where we gathered the entire family on Fridays, the place that most of our relatives came to ask for help when they were in trouble...it was a place that we gathered in happy and sad moments...during weddings, during birth, when we lost someone, when someone was released from prison...it was the place I felt happy...in control, loved, appreciated, respected...a place to talk, cry, share, meet, relax, fight. I was so proud of my home, so strong and energetic....Now...it looks like a grave yard...they buried all our energies and solidarity...now...we are divided and very lost. Samar, 58 years old.

Within the highly oppressive Israeli militaristic regime, the home is one of the few places where Palestinian women can find solace. As the only place for refuge, the home is a place for personal growth and community-building. As such, the home is an oppositional site within a military-state patriarchy and a place where Palestinian women can be safe from the “dual spheres of racism and sexism.”¹⁰

I argue that feminist methodologies in conflict zones must be attentive to the meaning that certain spaces carry, such as the meaning of the home space. The

⁹ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005), op.cit.

¹⁰ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2008), op.cit.

voices of Palestinian women revealed that the home represents a nurturing place that facilitates growth for them. The home was found to be the only place of refuge. It is a place for identity formation and community-building. The home, as we learn from Palestinian women, serves as a safe space they create from a history and life of displacement. For them, the home has become not just a site of personal cultivation, but a space of political resistance and agency. Losing their home is tantamount to losing the space in which they can safely transform into more independent and stronger individuals amidst the constant uncertainty and violence. It implies losing the space that affirmed their power of love and care, regardless of the strangulation of the Palestinian economy, the ongoing loss and deprivations, and the global denial thereof. It means losing the only space in which they can restore their dignity, denied by the structures of power and their industrialized security theology. While home for some Palestinian women might be what conventional feminist theories conceive of as a site of oppression and subordination, it is also the only space that affirms their humanity in an otherwise inhumane and brutal global and local contexts. As the site of “personal/political resistance,” the private space of the home gains heightened importance for individual women victims of military violence and constant displacement.

Similarly, my study on the effects of the Israeli Separation Wall on Palestinian school girls revealed how the ordeals of girls and their daily struggle to cross military checkpoints and pass through the Wall have become a serious concern and source of worry for them. Their fears of being sexually abused and harassed, their concerns of being left waiting for hours in the cold or under the sun, the denial of their right to access their schools, which caused them to miss examinations and disrupt their attendance, were found to have militarized their spaces and violated their right to education. Examining the daily struggles of girls and the ramification of the violation of their right to education was however lost in the legal, global and media discussions regarding the legality or illegality of the construction of the Wall. The ordeals of girls and voices were invisibilized, not only by the Israeli occupation and its supporters, but in some cases even by human right activists who used the legal and human right discourse to stress the illegality of the Wall’s construction, and unjust demolitions of house, while turning a blind eye to the psychological trauma of its construction.¹¹ But, in studying and engaging with the daily experiences of women and girls, I learned how violent conflicts affected their everydayness, the way they act, dress, plan their future, take decisions, marry, etc. I learned that in some cases parents

¹¹ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, & S. Khshuiboun, “Forbidden voices: Palestinian women facing the Israeli policy of house demolition,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* (2009).

decided to prevent girls from pursuing their education, fearing the effect of military checkpoints on their safety and security. In other cases, young girls were unable to cope with the daily humiliations and hardships, and decided to quit schools; in yet others girls agreed to an early marriage to escape the daily oppression.

Developing methodologies that are capable of reading, hearing and seeing the unseen requires that one look at the invisibilized others – in our case Palestinian women – as sources of invisible knowledge about the role and value of a safe home under constant upheavals. The continued invisibility of women's ordeals contributes to the failure to understand the effects of militarization and thus compounds the effect of instability and chaos during times of danger and trauma in conflict zones where uncertainties and the interruption of life prevail.

Researching this invisibility allowed me to challenge the epistemic violence of the hegemonic production of knowledge, which claimed that the Wall was constructed to “safeguard” and “protect” lives. It brought to the fore an ongoing ‘necropolitics,’ an economy of life and death that dictates whose life should be safeguarded and protected, and who are the uncounted ‘others.’ Hearing young girls’ voices enabled me to untangle the implications of colonialism, militarization, hegemonic ideologies and war on our methodologies. It opened up new windows of empowerment, and of researching invisibility. It brought to the research front, as to the conflict front, the importance of investigating the lack of access to hospitals and schools as a deliberate way to further the fragmentation of Palestinian society.

The Ever-Shifting Power of Spiral Transgressions

In my study on the gendered nature of education¹² I showed how the everydayness of militarism and violence affects the way in which young girls access their schools. The study quotes Reem, a 13-year-old girl who shared the following narrative:

I really want to continue going to school, but the soldiers and the Mishmar Hagvul [border patrol] keep on harassing me and my family. As you see, we live very close – one minute away – from the racist separation wall and the soldiers do not bother me on my way to school, but do not allow me to come back home after I am done. I am now sneaking around and reaching home from school

¹² Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2008), op.cit.

through the sewage pipes that are still open. Every time they refuse to allow me to come back home, they know that I will reach home either by walking more than five kilometres, or by sneaking through the sewage pipes.

Reem's voice reveals the way in which her time, space and route to school were violated on a daily basis. It speaks of her daily upheavals, as well as her acts of resistance and agency. However, Reem's ordeal is rarely seen or known, and her daily encounters, like those of many women and men living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), scarcely visible. The encounter between Israeli state violence and Palestinian women civilians is colonial in nature, a making of dominance through practices of violence that are directed at the colonized body, home and homeland. Colonial encounters, including violent evictions, claims that the land is empty, and the alleged need to save the colonized from their own "backward" culture and lack of civility, affect the daily acts of the colonized. The colonial power-holders have confined Palestinians to specific spaces and places in the OPT, and created a new colonial administration. People's movements and lives are under the control of the settler colonialism regime. The management of boundaries within the Palestinian spaces is also under their administration. Ghettoized spaces are created for the Palestinian 'other' controlled by military checkpoints, new zoning and planning laws, and the establishment of spaces and roads for settlers, both conceptually and materially. Thus the Palestinian body, home, school, time and space, and their everyday acts, are raced and gendered.

One instance of a counter-space, created in opposition to the demolished home, was found in Iqbal's narrative. She speaks of the night on which her home was demolished with only thirty minutes' warning:

They came, with their big bulldozers, cars, police forces... many soldiers with their weapons directed at my children... and the noise... their voices, their Hebrew language which no one understood, made me feel like I was in a whirlpool [dawameh]. I was running like crazy, between calming down the kids, fearing they would be shot, collecting our papers, documents, birth certificates... collecting the gold the children got as presents from their grandparents... I was trying to gather everything in such a hurry... and when they said that they are about to demolish the house, Salim, my four-year-old son [at the time he was under the age of two] was not around. I thought he was inside the house and started screaming... screaming without being able to stop. But he was right beside me, holding my deshdashah [a long, wide

*housedress] ... When they started demolishing the house, I hugged him with his sisters... wrapped them all in my deshdasheh and we all cried. To this day, the girls still remember how the whole family stood, wrapped in my dirty home deshdasheh, crying like we have never cried before, cried and cried while our hearts were on fire.*¹³

Examining the invisibility in Iqbal's act enables us to expand our understanding of world politics to include the personal ordeal of the otherized, as constitutive of previously invisible spheres, and to conceive of women's acts of resistance and agency as counter-hegemonic acts that function under a severe and spiral transgression. Studying invisibility in the context of spiral transgression in conflict-ridden areas raises crucial feminist/political and ethical issues that one cannot turn a blind eye to. The development of a feminist methodology that acknowledges and visibilizes the ordeals of women in conflict zones is both an epistemological and political action, a means of turning methodology into a political act of resistance to subjugation.

The study of the home and the educational space as sites of invisibility, but also as a source of knowledge, reveals the spiral and intricate connection between internal factors (personal, familial, community) and structural/politico-economic factors. As the Palestinian case-studies indicated (and as could be seen in many conflict zones), the localized institutionalization of the violence and of peace, has facilitated our understanding of the effect of the workings of localized global militarism on the everydayness of women's lives. Engaging with women's voices revealed the way displacement, home demolitions, the deprivation of education and loss is a clear and deliberate strategy of war. The silencing and invisibilization of the displaced Palestinian since the 1948 Nakba (the Palestinian catastrophe), and the spiral effect of physical and emotional dislocation, including the destruction of whole communities, led to drastic changes in the behavior of women and girls, the loss of certain values, and acquisition of new ones. For example, visibilizing how women shape and re-shape their subjectivity to reduce risk under extreme violence could be illuminating for researchers of conflict zones. Revealing the silenced and invisibilizing global effect of deprivation of education, of safety, and of certainty and predictability, and the everydayness of violence, via critical feminist methodology, is a feminist and a political act. A methodology of this kind allows us to comprehend how the

¹³ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005), op.cit., 133.

personal and familial hold life together and help women to preserve the humanity of their loved ones.

In order to develop a feminist methodology of the politics of invisibility, I have attempted to un-map the daily experiences of the Palestinian woman and the effect that spiral transgression has on her (as on other Palestinians), and her rights to housing and education, as well as to free access to family, school, health, water, food, etc. This process of un-mapping helps us uncover the hierarchies of the hidden and apparent violence. Un-mapping and making Palestinian women's 'invisible' spiral transgressions visible, requires that we look at the roots of the historical injustice caused to Palestinians and juxtapose it with the effect of continuous settler colonialist violence and militarism. It is a process that compels us to question the relationship between her identity politics, as a Palestinian refugee, the politics of "invisibilizing" her rights, cause, needs and everydayness of suffering and the geopolitics of the colonial project as reflected in the spatial politics of land grabbing, displacement and housing demolitions. Analyzing the relationship between identity politics, geopolitics, and the politics of invisibility requires that we analyze their effect on the day to day encounters of Palestinian women living in a context of global denial of their basic rights to life and livelihood. The analyses of everydayness require that one reads the colonized woman's "invisibility" through the organizations of politics in her everyday life. It means that we look at what is being imposed and projected onto specific bodies and lives.

Developing a feminist methodology that reveals the invisibility of women's daily acts of resistance requires that we first un-pack the technologies of domination, such as control over bodily safety and security, over water, food, electricity, movement. It requires un-mapping the control over spaces, places, time, economies and development; all employed by the settler colonialist regime. Such a methodology asks that we read the counter-languages, counter-actions and counter-spaces created by the colonized and the occupied in putting up resistance to oppression. It also requires a reading of the spiral, continuous, and ever-shifting power of the colonizer's technologies of dominance.

Feminist Methodology and the Dangers of Invisibility and Visibility

The paper argued that the Feminist failure to develop methodologies that visibilize the invisible is not merely an academic issue, but also a political one that requires careful analyses of history and justice. I argue that there is a serious danger in both invisibilizing and visibilizing women's ordeals and the spiral effect of the everydayness of violence against women in conflict zones. Such an

argument calls us to keep in our mind questions such as: What is the price of not engaging with women's ordeals and their call for historical justice? What is the price of not acting upon the everydayness of their experiences, and for denying women's theorization a platform? What is the price of researching women in conflict zones without allowing them to speak 'truth to power' through the research? What is the price of failing to visibilize the invisible? What is the effect of the trauma of silencing? All these are relevant questions that need further unpacking.

Sociological analyses of visibility¹⁴ pointed to the importance of studying asymmetries and distortions of visibility, when they are the norm, and suggested that these should be incorporated in critical feminist methodology. Furthermore, I posit that such asymmetries transform the visibility-invisibility issue into a site of strategy and politics and hence require a counter politics, methodology and language. A methodology that stipulates the tracking of the archeology of the "invisible" women's resistance in conflict zone helps us debunk the engineered Western scholarship, be it that on traumatology, which tends to pathologize acts of resistance¹⁵, or human rights, which needs to use the legal regulatory discourses and thus legalizes and de-politicizes inhumane acts ¹⁶ or criminology or victimology, which are deeply influenced by those who control the production of knowledge and its academic stronghold. Palestinian women's hidden/silenced voices teach us that developing a feminist methodology that probes invisibility requires that we also question how, why and when visibility intersects with perceptions of dangers and 'security'. It requires us to look at, and engage with the way in which the marginality of woman intersects with her 'dangerousness' as a Palestinian, and how the Israeli state constructs a security theology that operates at all levels of everyday life to silence and invisibilize women's voices.

Connecting the dots between the politics of transforming the visible into invisible, and comprehending the workings of power in normalizing or denying such invisibility, as apparent in the voices of Palestinian women living in conflict zones, takes us back to where we started. It takes us back to analyzing the effect of the local and global politics of denial in understanding the politics of researching "invisibility" and the invisibilized in conflict and war zones. It invites us to closely research the politics of seeing and listening, while mapping

¹⁴ A. Brighenti, "Visibility: A Category for Social Science," *Current Sociology*, 55(3) (2007): 323-342.

¹⁵ I. Martín-Baró, *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*. Ed. Ignacio Martín-Baró Ed and trans. A. Aron & S. Corne (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press: 1996).

¹⁶ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian & S. Khsheiboun, (2009), op. cit.

the terrifying landscape in which order, regularity, predictability, routine, and everydayness itself is organized in militarized zones. It assists us in developing a critical feminist methodology that documents and engages in the every day acts of resistance/survival of the “invisible” women living in conflict zones.

Moreover, the shaping and management of visibility and invisibility raises questions such as who are the women in conflict zones who should or should not be seen and why. It also requires one to unpack the regime of invisibility. Visibility is an operation of power, controlled and operated by the politics and knowledge production, when the invisible is not static or absolute, but rather an owner of hidden power that should be feared.¹⁷ Researching the invisible trauma of Palestinians, when they lose their homes and homeland and when they survive constant danger and uncertainties, requires that one looks at the interlocking connections between the spiral transgressions of trauma and invisibility in the historical context of racism and invisibilizing, globalized power politics. To understand the silenced voices of girls who are deprived of their right to access education, or comprehend the meaning of the loss of the home to Palestinian women, one should study the invisibility of their histories, of the global denial of their rights, as well as the invisibility of their psychological traumas as young girls and women facing continuous injustice.

The women’s voices shared in this paper also present a challenge to the role of international politics in denying justice to Palestinians, by highlighting how the daily, private lives of women are closely linked to global politics of seeing one side, while rendering the other “invisible”. Hence, studying invisibility requires both a macro and micro analyses of the global political economy, to link women’s private lives with the global power game. Studying invisibility can help us detect ‘security’ allegations that may further silence the unseen. Studying women and their families at moments of militarization and displacement, when the body, the future, the home and the family are threatened might at times disturb the production of hegemonic knowledge. The question remains whether such disturbance could be considered a form of feminist political action. Reading and writing invisibility contributes in many cases to preventing individual women from losing their achievements in the daily struggle for survival. Whether such a methodology would empower or be transformative for women in extreme situations of violence is a question that remains unanswered.

¹⁷ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Education and the Israeli Industry of Fear,” in *Education in the Arab Region: Global Dynamics, Local Resonances*, World Yearbook of Education, Routledge, 2009.

Two final questions remain unanswered: What is the price of disclosing the invisible experiences for Palestinian women? Who would pay the price of such visibility? And might visibility add insult to injury and inflict additional trauma and loss? Based on my clinical activism and the research shared in this paper on home demolitions and the militarization of education, I would like to argue that, in some cases, women themselves exercise the right to remain silent and chose to live in the darkness, in an effort to negotiate their survival strategies. Their refusal to speak up should not only be taken into consideration, but also respected and protected, for – as I have stated elsewhere in my research on women facing sexual abuse in Palestine ¹⁸ – women are not vehicles for political activism, research or change. Our first and most important ethical and political commitment as feminists should be to be guided by women’s judgments, silences, speeches and choices. To me, being a feminist means not only bringing or not bringing the power and meanings inherent in silence and speech; it also means being responsive and responsible for the ways of engaging, writing, reading and not-writing or visibilizing the hidden voices of those who are surviving in the dark and dealing with injustice on a daily basis.

Notions of academic ‘truths’ and our commitment to those we study in the context of the politics of invisibility and responsibility bear complicated ethical and political meanings and ideologies. The stories of women and girls, such as that of Mariam, made me question the role of developing a methodology that is able to make the invisible visible, and to write about the wrongs done to the “invisibilized” in the midst of a volatile and violent conflict.

Women may need to remain invisible, and their decision to deny their knowledge a voice, and prevent their narratives from seeing the light of day should guide our constructions. But one must not forget that it is in the mere intimate level of Mariam’s “invisible” life suffering, and with an attention to the everydayness of the details, that one could develop a feminist methodology that researches invisibility, and comprehends in depth the effect of the power of spiral transgressions on women’s lives. For as Mbembe states: “power, in its own violent quest for grandeur and prestige, makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence.” ¹⁹ Consequently, it is this intimacy of experience and

¹⁸ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Blocking her exclusion: A contextually sensitive model of intervention for handling female abuse,” *Social Service Review* 74 (4), (2004): 620-634 and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Imposition of Virginity Testing: a Life-Saver or a License to Kill. *Social Science and Medicine*,” V 60 (2004): 1187-1196. 2.453; 6, 4/28.

¹⁹ A. Mbembe, “The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony, *Public Culture* 4(2) (1992): 1-30.

the obscenity of power – as Mbembe defines it - that one should attempt to uncover in researching “invisibility”.²⁰

I would like to thank Sarah Layton for her assistance with this paper.

²⁰ Ibid