

Femicide and Colonization: Between the Politics of Exclusion and the Culture of Control

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Abstract

This article explores the murder of women and girls, which we name it Femicide, among the Palestinian community living in Israel. Specifically, it analyzes how the dialectic interrelationship between informal and formal legal-social systems constructs the murders of Palestinian women. The data revealed that femicide is a crime empowered by the wider context of colonization and the increasing spatial segregation of Palestinian communities. The study confirms the need to move beyond simplistic “cultural” explanations of femicide, and pay closer attention to the ways in which the structure, politics and economy of death function in colonized spaces and contexts.

Keywords

colonization, femicide, Palestine

Introduction

The murder of women and girls under the pretense of “honor” has emerged as one of the most sensationalized issues in the global media and feminist analyses alike, especially as they pertain to Arab and Muslim societies. Beyond the sensationalism, however, there is relatively little critical analysis exploring the social circumstances in which such murders take place, how they are positioned by and embedded in various systems, and the manners in which they are discursively constructed and represented.

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The aim of this article is to analyze the ways in which the dialectic interrelationship between formal and informal legal-social systems constructs Palestinian women's murders within Israeli society, a relationship that functions in and is to a large extent empowered by a wider context of colonization. The main focus will be on the processes through which a national "politics of exclusion" colludes with a localized "culture of control" to generate the context within which violence against colonized women in colonial zones is fueled, strengthened, and even justified, by colonized and colonizer alike. The term *politics of exclusion* refers to the colonial mechanisms through which the Israeli state participates in the denial of the Palestinian people's rights to, among others, safety, housing, freedom of movement, political rights, economic development, education, and health. The term *culture of control* refers to localized manifestations of patriarchal and masculine logics that are empowered by the politics of exclusion.

The article is based on research conducted with the Palestinian community that lives within the borders of the State of Israel (and whose homeland was colonized in 1948).¹ Specifically, the article focuses on the city of Ramleh, chosen due to both an increase in women being killed there over the past decade and its spatial significance. With most of its Palestinian residents expelled in 1948, Ramleh exists as a "contested" city with a Jewish majority and also a sizeable Palestinian minority. Like other "contested" cities in Israel, Ramleh is characterized by urban space designed to essentialize and segregate Arab-Palestinian and Jewish communities (see Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). In such "contested" cities, the Palestinian minority is subordinated spatially, socially, politically, and economically, producing an urban landscape that reproduces wider national interactions between "hegemonic oppression and minority reaction" (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003, p. 673). The case study of Ramleh is thus well positioned to explore the ways in which colonization constructs the daily lives of Palestinians in Israel, as well as to explore the complex social-legal and spatial effects of their exclusion by the Israeli state. In the context of the murder of Palestinian women, this specific case highlights the ways in which new forms of Empire have unleashed new tools of violence (Hardt & Negri, 2000; see also Abu-Lughod, 2002), and how these tools are used by members of local communities to justify violence against women.

Femicide, Representation, and the Politics of Naming

The term *femicide* is used in this article to refer to the murder of women and girls by a family member or members, whether this violence occurs within or outside of the confines of the home. In the Palestinian context, the concept of "femicide" was first used by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2004) to denote "all violent acts that instill a perpetual fear in women or girls of being killed under the justification of 'honor'" (p. 10). Femicide remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations committed against Arab-Palestinian women and girls. It denies them safety and security, strips them of dignity, and undermines their ability to enjoy their fundamental right to life. The use of the term *femicide* is proposed to counter the common usage of the terms *honor crimes* or *family honor crimes*. Importantly, it signifies a refusal to accept the

designation of the act of killing a woman or girl as “honorable” when perpetrated by a father, brother, or other family member. An argument is made for a broader categorization of such crimes, one that entails a clear rejection of the terminology of *crimes of honor*, or, as they are sometimes defined in Israel, “crimes committed on romantic basis”²² and in Western contexts “crimes of passion,” as there is no honor, romance, or passion in such killings (Coomaraswamy, 2005).

Moreover, the use of the term femicide instead of honor killings is considered critical to counter dominant culturalized depictions of such crimes. Particularly in the context of Arab societies, discussions of femicide often draw on Orientalist depictions of “Arab culture,” which are usually supported by shallow analyses that present Western societies as “cultureless” contrasted to those societies represented as the “Cultural Other” (Volpp, 2000). In this cultural framing, the killing of women for the purpose of family “honor” is simply something intrinsic to “Arab culture,” which is purportedly violent, misogynistic, barbaric, and backward (Said, 1978). Although such culturalized explanations have *never* been sufficient or adequate when it comes to understanding femicide, they are especially important to challenge in this present period where imperial agendas deploy powerful images and icons of the oppression of Middle Eastern women as *casus belli*.

Avoiding engagement with the logics that drive sensationalized issues like femicide is clearly not a responsible approach for a Palestinian feminist. On one hand, it is contended that efforts to depoliticize acts of femicide by locating them entirely in the realm of “culture” are not only grossly misguided but also contribute to the construction of a racialized and racist framework that fails to address the murders of the Palestinian women effectively. Exploring the situation of Afghani women in the United States-led war on Afghanistan, Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that cultural logics prevent serious consideration of the roots and nature of human suffering (p. 784). Instead of seeking historical and political explanations, cultural framings encourage religiocultural ones rather than “questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we [are] offered ones that . . . artificially divide the world into separate spheres—recreating an imaginative geography of west versus east, us versus Muslims” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). In the context of seriously addressing femicide among the Palestinian minority in Israel, it is imperative to avoid the simplistic and arguably imperializing connotations of the questions that arise out of the culturalized perspective.

On the other hand, it is critical to acknowledge that femicide—the killing of women by virtue of the fact that they are women—is a global epidemic. The limited Orientalist analysis of “dividing cultures into violent and violence free,” as Shahrzad Mojab (2003) points out, “is in and of itself a patriarchal myth” (p. 2). Femicide exists in every country, cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity, and age. The global dimensions of this violence are alarming, as studies on its prevalence have highlighted (Coomaraswamy, 2005). No society can claim to be free of such violence, although there are of course variations in the patterns and trends of femicide within different regions, countries, and social groups (such as minorities, indigenous women, migrant women, refugee women, women living in the shadow of

armed conflict, women with disabilities, female children, elderly women, and so on). The typical passivity toward tackling femicide displayed by the states worldwide and their law-enforcing machineries is evidence that it is neither a particular cultural phenomenon, nor is it one exclusive to Palestinians.

It is critical to address these cultural logics to the extent that they continue to frame discussions and policy outcomes on issues of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly in Arab and Muslim communities. In this vein, this article attempts to set forth a framework of analysis that moves beyond essentializing cultural logics to show how economic, political, and social processes create spaces for articulations of “Palestinian culture”—as if it were a static context—that justifies the crime of femicide. Such articulations, in turn, are appropriated, selectively deployed, and circulated in global discourses and analyses of GBV that continue to project femicide as a “crime of honor,” rather than a crime that is fueled by the interplay between a colonial politics of exclusion and a localized culture of control.

The Palestinian Minority in Israel

Palestinian society lived through a long history of Zionist colonization and displacement during the early 20th century, which culminated in the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 when the Jewish State of Israel was established. The majority of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes and land. Some fled to neighboring Arab states, while others abandoned their homes for other towns and villages in Historic Palestine, including locations within the borders of the newly established state as well as in what are now the occupied territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. Only a minority remained in their original homes.

Today the Palestinian minority in the Israeli state numbers approximately 1.2 million people, who are Israeli citizens by law. Although the issues faced by this Palestinian minority are commensurably different to those faced by Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories, it is important to acknowledge that the status of the occupation has significant refractive effects for Palestinians inside Israel. In particular, the *Intifada* that began in October 2000 signaled increasing Israeli oppression against all segments of Palestinian society, as the Jewish state intensified the use of “security necessities” to further crackdown on and target Palestinians. This, coupled with growing Islamophobia in the West, resulted in a commensurate rise in the levels of both despair and resistance within Palestinian communities, as Palestinians were simultaneously confronted by increasingly harsher internal measures and a largely global denial of the legitimacy of the Palestinian struggle (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002). Furthermore, since the outbreak of the *Intifada*, Palestinians have witnessed a hardening of segregative ideologies and escalating Israeli control over the spaces in which they live—a control that, too, is empowered by the logics of “security” and compounded by the fear of the “terrorist Arab.”

Certainly, space is a critical question in a colonial settler nation like Israel, and Palestinian daily existence is structured spatially to be constructed politically. As Lefebvre (1991) reminds us, space is a human production, and not a natural or

presocial phenomenon. It is thus always political and a constituent aspect of politics, existing as both an object and matrix of power. In the context of Israel, redefining and controlling space is an integral component of its national project. After the initial establishment of the Jewish state, Zionism necessitated the exclusivity of Jewish accessibility to what that state encompassed, both spatially and temporally. Spatially, Israel created a new *fait accompli*, rendering the territory of the state a struggle space in which competing narratives are played out and colonial sovereignty enacted. Israeli Jews have continuously structured national space with meaning and emotions, in order to produce views that are appropriate to their claims of sovereignty over the land. In this context, segregating Arab-Palestinians and tightening control over the spaces in which they live has profound significance for the (re)production of the Zionist vision of Israel as a nation-state for the Jewish people.

It is against this backdrop over the last decade of heightened oppression against Palestinians and an intensifying colonial politics of segregation by the Israeli state that we must assess the nature and intensity of GBV, including the crime of femicide. It is a combination of these factors—the silence of the global community in the face of ever-harsher aggression, the growing sense of frustration and despair among members of Palestinian communities, the spatial confinement of Palestinians in enclaves, in addition to the rapidly declining socioeconomic conditions in which Palestinians currently live—that must provide the backdrop for a proper understanding of the social-political contexts in which violence against Palestinian women has become normalized.

Of these contexts, the one with which this article is primarily concerned is the intersection between formal and informal legal-social systems for the Palestinian minority in Israel. Significantly, these systems have become inextricably intertwined since the establishment of the Jewish state; while many informal legal systems have remained, Palestinians inside Israel have gradually shifted from accessing their own internal, informal systems to the formal Israeli legal system (Hassan, 1999; Shalhoub-Kervorkian, 2004, 2005). Not only does this relationship between formal and informal legal-social systems help to construct the daily lives of Palestinians in Israel, especially those of women who are always located at the lowest rungs of the hierarchy of both, but, as we will see, it is also embedded strongly in the wider context of colonization.

Colonization, and the Interrelationship Between Formal and Informal Systems

Subject to Israeli control, Palestinian society is in a state of continuous colonization, spurred by a process of national Judaization (Yiftachel, 1998; Zureik, 1979). As much as this colonization is clearly rendered differently for Palestinians inside Israel than it is for those “outside” of it in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, it is important to acknowledge the centrality of colonialism to Palestinian understandings and experiences. While the fields of colonial and postcolonial studies provide numerous definitions of the term *colonialism*, in its broadest sense it refers to the subjugation of one people by another. Colonialism is thus a relation of unequal power, that is, a form of domination and (political) control of a territory and population by a state (Horwarth,

1972). The coercion exercised by the colonizer is typically justified by some kind of ideology that regularly implies the perception of the superiority of the colonizer over the colonized population (see Fanon, 1968; Said, 1978). Colonialism is often further understood to imply some form of economic exploitation (Horvarth, 1972), as well as a “process of culture-change” of the colonized people, in which the colonizer attempts to impose a new—his—cultural order on the colonized population (Merry, 1991, p. 894). In the case of Palestinians inside Israel, all these facets of colonialism collude to produce a complicated set of circumstances, circumstances explored here through the prism of femicide.

This article comprehends the colonial situation in which the Palestinian community in Israel lives through Agamben’s (2005) notion of “state of exception.” “States of exception” are the spaces where the laws of sovereign states—such as those prohibiting killing or concerned with promoting accepted standards of justice—no longer apply, and it is, as Carl Schmitt asserts, the sovereign power (in this case, Israel) who decides upon the state of exception (cited in Agamben, 2005, p. 1). This state of exception forges a situation in which Palestinian society is simultaneously excluded and included; excluded as “security” and “demographic” threats to the Jewish state, but included by virtue of Israel’s political control over Palestinian lives and the spaces in which they live them. It is a state in which life is “bare,” and in which death, too, is bare, particularly in the case of women. With the social constructed by the political (and vice versa), the political condition in which Palestinians find themselves participates in the construction of Palestinian social structures. It is hence the colonial condition that plays a role in constructing issues of the status of women and gender relations within Palestinian society. Projects of colonization aim, in part, at excluding the Other, and colonization scripts relations of domination over the land as well as the bodies of people. Women’s bodies, sexuality, and spaces are one of the means through which such projects proceed.

This wider colonial context both frames and generates a complex interrelationship between informal Palestinian systems and the formal Israeli legal system, resulting in the Palestinian community living what could be conceptualized as a hybrid and liminal state of existence (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). These informal structures, which include systems of kinship, patriarchy, and the traditional tribal system, continue to play a role in defining the physical and social boundaries within which female and male individuals are able to move and act. They are primary contributors to the regulation of social behavior, roles, responsibilities, and relations among members of Palestinian society in general. Such regulation is achieved through the enforcement of social norms and codes of “honor” that define and delimit, among others, one’s mobility, choice of spouse, type and level of education, dress, profession, and sexual behavior. Holding onto the concept of “honor” serves the purpose of preserving the social power of informal structures and fulfilling their material and social interests.

Israel’s ongoing control over the Palestinian minority has in many ways empowered and strengthened these informal structures, with many Palestinians rejecting Israeli formal systems and institutes as forms of collaboration with or extensions of the colonizer. This is particularly true in the context of informal structures that pertain to questions of “honor” and the regulation of women’s bodies and lives, something too

which can be understood as a reaction to Israeli systems of control over the Palestinian minority. As Foucault (1980) states, one reaction to control exercised by an external power is to return this control to the external power itself, which can be done in several ways. In the Palestinian context, the imbalance of external Israeli and internal Palestinian control (Israelis hold and control the power, while Palestinians wield far less power and are controlled) means that “returning control” tends to be more directed at community insiders who have less power—primarily women, but also children, the handicapped and the elderly. Exercising control over women, especially their sexuality, constitutes a patriarchal means of maintaining control of and managing the internal social equilibrium.

Power, as Foucault (1980) reminds us, is productive, in the sense that it produces types of behaviors and events. Israeli power and control produces types of social behavior, including behavior that empowers informal systems and control over marginal groups within Palestinian society. Women’s bodies become sites of struggle for internal control, and femicide is a form of self-destruction that results from external control exercised by colonial powers (see Fanon, 1963, for a deeper explanation of such dynamics).

In the context of formal structures like the Israeli legal system, it is important to recognize that law is also a colonial tool. Certainly, most colonial regimes have relied on legal instruments to enforce their will (Chanock, 2001). As Merry (1991) argues, law often “serves as the handmaiden for processes of domination, helping to create new systems of control and regulation” and has thus been an essential element of colonial administration (p. 917). Colonialism has typically implied the transfer of the colonizing power’s laws and legal institutions to the colonized society, something that is most certainly the case for the Palestinian minority in Israel. Colonial institutions have regularly adopted regulations to govern, for example, land, labor, and the family. Colonial law, hand in hand with the institutions that promulgate and implement it, has transformed conceptions of time and space, of works and property, and of the state in general. According to Merry (1991), “the role played by the law in the colonizing process is an instance of its capacity to reshape culture and consciousness” (p. 980).

Hegemonic powers are thus practiced daily on the bodies and sexuality of Palestinian women via several institutions, including formal and informal social institutions. Formal and informal relations of power are diffused throughout society, and individuals are sites within which power is practiced (Foucault, 1980). It is, of course, important to acknowledge that Palestinian women have and continue to resist prevailing relations of power, whether they be Israeli colonization, Palestinian traditional rule, or the patriarchal structures inherent in both (Shalhoub-Kervorkian, 2004). Nevertheless, the mutually empowering relationship between the two systems places Palestinian women in a distinctly vulnerable position.

Research Questions and Methodology

One of the main research questions before us is how these overlapping systems construct and affect bodily and sexual politics in cases of femicide. In order to analyze

how the dialectic interrelationship between formal and informal legal-social systems constructs femicide within the Palestinian minority in Israel, the article specifically addresses the following research question:

- How does the interrelationship between informal, tribal, social-legal Palestinian systems and the Israeli legal system construct the daily lives of Palestinian women, and their live and dead bodies?

In investigating this question, the study adopts a qualitative research methodology. Given that there are multiple layers of meaning in instances of femicide, influenced by the interactions of various political, social, psychological, economic, biopolitical, and spatial contexts, a qualitative paradigm allows for a deeper means with which to uncover multifaceted and dynamic perceptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Moreover, qualitative research enables interrogation of the ways in which the personal is political and the private is public one of the foundational philosophical premises of feminism, and consequently allowing for the reconceptualization of the home/family space as a political domain. Considering that femicide is typically painted as a “family issue” and therefore largely excluded from public concern, this methodological approach is critical from a political perspective.

The process of data collection consisted of a combination of interviews (both planned and unplanned, constructed and not constructed), textual analysis, and observations (participant and nonparticipant). The data collected were gathered through:

- Interviews with the chief *Imam* of the Big Mosque in Ramleh and the director of female youth programs in the Childhood Programs Association in Ramleh, who is also the manager of the Female Youth Center in the town; an unplanned interview with the General Director of NGO Women Against Violence (WAV); and an interview with a forensic technician from the Israeli Institute of Forensic Medicine, where the dead bodies of murdered women are taken for autopsy in order to ascertain the direct cause of death.³
- Textual analyses, conducted on various documents, including all media coverage of femicide cases within the Palestinian community in Israel; the protocol of a conference entitled “Women and Girls in Ramleh and Lydda: Future Visions,” which took place on 12 December 2008 in Ramleh; two court protocols; a position paper on the issue of killing women (in Israel) published by the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), and the protocol a Knesset meeting on the subject of promoting the position of women in the “Arab sector.”⁴
- Statistics compiled from data collected by various human rights and women’s rights organizations.
- Literature, including books and articles, on the issue of femicide published on and by members of the Palestinian minority in Israel.

The data collection was accompanied by a process of determining the themes and categories of the analysis, which will be detailed in the below section on findings.

Findings

The number of Palestinian women citizens of Israel killed in confirmed femicide cases over the past decade numbers approximately 76. Of these, five were killed in 2000, nine in 2001, one in 2002, four in 2003, five in 2004, eight in 2005, nine in 2006,⁵ ten in 2007, six in 2008, nine in 2009, ten in 2010, nine in 2011 and five in 2012. Comparatively a relatively high rate of femicide cases took place between the years of 2000 and 2007 in the Al-Gawareesh neighborhood of Ramleh, the focus of our case study; indeed, more cases were confirmed here than in any other Palestinian town inside Israel. Most of the victims were killed by their brothers and other male relatives, often cousins. Given that Al-Gawareesh is spatially, economically and socially excluded from wider Ramleh, a complex picture emerged from the research, in which social, religious, political, legal and spatial processes combine to construct the crime of femicide.

Not a long time ago they came and told me that my turn was next. They have a list, every woman knows if she's on this list or not. If you are on the list, it doesn't matter whether you did something or not, they will find a reason to say you behaved badly. If a woman has a cellular phone, they might kill her. If she talked with someone they might kill her. We have men in the family who hate women. . . . It's enough for someone to say something about a girl or a woman, that's it. One guy might provoke and anger the entire family, turning them against the woman. Afterward they will begin the planning, what they will do with her. Sometimes they work on the plan for a whole year, and the whole time she is aware of the fact that they plan to kill her, until they kill her. If the woman knows that there is a plan to kill her, sometimes she goes to the heads and elders of the family to ask them do something to calm the situation. But they can't help all the time. The problem is that when they construct their murder plan they fear no one. After they complete their plan, they decide who will do it. There is a list of girls and every one of them knows that she is on it. As they said to me what they said to the other women—"Wait, wait, your turn will come soon." I left the neighborhood because of that. There are many women who are afraid to leave because they fear asking for help from the authorities. . . . (cited in Zinger-Heruti, 2007a)

The foregoing quotation is an excerpt from a testimony provided by Maysa (a pseudonym) to the police and published in an Israeli newspaper. Maysa is a young woman from Al-Gawareesh. In her testimony she describes the process of planning the killing of a woman. Maysa spoke following the killings of eight women in Al-Gawareesh over the preceding 8 years. Between the years 2000 and 2008, 10 women overall have been confirmed killed in incidents of femicide. Their names are Nayfa (killed in August 2000), Suzan (killed in February 2002), Zinat (killed in November 2003), Sabreen (killed in July 2004), Ameerah (killed in January 2005), Reem (killed in March 2006), Sherihan (killed in April 2006), Hamdah (killed in January 2007), an anonymous woman from the same family who was also killed in 2007, and Dalia (killed in December 2008) (cited in Zinger-Heruti, 2007b). Maysa is currently missing and it is suspected that she was also killed after giving her testimony. In the case of Hamdah, 20 women from her family testified against the killer, who was her brother. However, despite their testimonies, the Tel Aviv District Court delivered a verdict of not guilty of the crime of murder, but found him guilty of the lesser charge of being an accomplice to murder (Zinger-Heruti, 2008).

When interviewed, the chief *Imam* (clergyman) of the Big Mosque of Ramleh said:

The nature of people there makes them consider the woman an object that gives them children. They think and they say that a woman has no opinion; she's nothing more than a woman who must uphold the honor of the family. If not, she is to be killed.⁶

According to the chief *Imam*,⁷ Ramleh constitutes a unique context because of the highly heterogeneous character of the Palestinian population that resides in the city and on its outskirts. The population consists of refugees (who moved to the city from other locations in and after 1948), Bedouin and natives residents of the city, as well as others. The population of Ramleh stood at 64,200 in 2006, of which approximately one third, at 14,200 people, were Arab-Palestinian (Abu-Hatum, 2008). Al-Gawareesh is home to roughly 4,500 to 5,000 residents, the majority of whom are Bedouin originally from the Naqab (the southern area of Israel). As the chief *Imam* stated, Al-Gawareesh, built in the early 1950s, is one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in Ramleh.

As asserted earlier, Ramleh was chosen as a case study due to both its high occurrences of femicide and its spatially segregated character. Governmental institutions have exacerbated this spatial exclusion by failing to stop these persistent crimes against women, and cultural, religious-based or Orientalist explanatory logics are typically used in analyzing instances of femicide in the area. Such logics are employed by both male perpetrators—who generally justify their behavior by the need to preserve “family” and “culture”—and Israeli formal institutions alike, resulting in a situation where Palestinian women are reluctant to report abuse due to their lack of trust in the police and legal system.

The use of such logics has shaped the representation of femicide by Israeli legal systems, with respect to both the victim of the crime and the perpetrator. For instance, a policeman who had worked on femicide cases in Ramleh spoke about the killing of women as a cultural issue rooted in Eastern, Arab-Muslim customs. He made the following statement at the “Women and Girls in Ramleh and Lydda” conference:

I want to see men in this conference in order to talk to them about their aggression, about culture and other things . . . I deal with this problem, which is a major one within the Arab population . . . I want to change accepted behaviors within this society . . . These men are taking the law into their own hands . . .

This policeman's words reveal his disregard for the complicated context in which the Palestinian population of Ramleh lives. The speakers at the aforementioned conference and the interviews we conducted revealed that the socioeconomic hardship of Ramleh, and the neighborhood of Al-Gawareesh in particular, has had a debilitating effect on the local population and made it even more susceptible to abuse from without and within. For example, unemployment rates are very high, especially among young men, and there is no public transportation to or from Al-Gawareesh. Moreover, a wall has been constructed to separate it from the adjacent Jewish neighborhoods of Gani-Dan and Yafe-Nof, resulting in a systematically entrenched situation of spatial

exclusion spurred by continuous colonization. The location and physical separation of Al-Gawareesh, as well as its difficult socioeconomic situation, means that it is a highly isolated community in all respects. Such isolation impoverishes lives and can turn women's bodies into *femina sacra*.

Several cases of femicide were found to have resulted from the reproduction of patriarchal mentalities in a colonized context, as was echoed in the words of a social worker and representative of WAV who worked in Ramleh:

Violence is not something unique to Arab men and they did not discover or produce it. Nor is it unique to Ramleh . . . It's the language of the whole world; we are living in a society and world where there has always been violence . . . Arab society has a patriarchal structure. It's a collectivist society in which the individual gains his confidence and his strength from being a part of his family . . . The disadvantage of such a structure is that freedom and the ability to achieve self-fulfillment are low, especially when it comes to women, who are located low down the patriarchal hierarchy. The exclusion of the group, as in the Al-Gawareesh neighborhood, weakens the individual more and more and strengthens the patriarchal structure . . . As in every society, the [colonizer] will never work to change the bad situation of the [colonized] . . . The [colonizer] will never free the [colonized] because he's comfortable with destroying the [colonized].⁸

The social worker further stated that

Palestinian Arab society is a patriarchal society, but violence is a worldwide phenomenon, and we are living in a state of which the military and militarization are a fundamental part . . . In mixed cities such as Ramleh, we witness the state's constant efforts to weaken and exclude the Arab community . . . The Israeli state doesn't invest in it in the same manner as it invests in other places. It does not allocate the same budgetary funds, build infrastructure or run awareness-raising programs in schools as it does for the Jewish population . . . the socioeconomic situation of the Arabs in Ramleh is very difficult . . . Israelis have tightened the stranglehold around them, which has minimized their ability to develop and learn. All this leads to a maximization of violence, as is well known all over the world . . . The man knows that he is expected to build a home and to finance a family, and when he can't do so he feels inadequate as a man.⁹

The social worker's words uncover a colonial situation with very specific gendered, classed and spaced effects, where spatial and economic segregation, as well as social and political structural neglect, have profound effects for the construction, representation and lived reality of gender relations.

Accordingly, the data revealed a very complex set of circumstances in which control over women's bodies or sexuality is not always the primary cause of femicide. According to the chief *Imam* of the Big Mosque in Ramleh, in some cases a woman may be killed because she refused to give money to her brother, or to relinquish a portion of her inheritance to him. As the *Imam* stated, "I remember a case of an 80-year-old woman who had been killed by her brothers and their sons because they wanted the inheritance, but the police and the media called it an 'honor killing.'" In other cases, it may be divorce that heightens a woman's vulnerability. For example, in a police

interview Nihaya (a pseudonym) explained that, "I asked for a divorce. My brother said no way. I asked him what he would do if I did get a divorce, and he replied, 'You would be the next to die'" (cited in Zinger-Heruti, 2007c). The responses provided by the interview subjects and the documented data indicate that the causes for the killings are varied. However, regardless of their real motives the killers and their close relations use the pretext of preserving the "honor of the family" to justify their acts, knowing that Israeli legal system typically accepts such explanations.

The situation is exacerbated by the lack of police response to these crimes. Prior to even investigating cases of suspected femicide the police routinely resort to the pretext of "honor" upon learning of the murder of a Palestinian woman or girl by her brother or father. Classifying such crimes as "honor" crimes allows the police system to relegate the crime to an "internal family matter" and "cultural issue," and hence one in which they cannot effectively intervene. However, the lack of police investment in combating femicide also affects the murders of Palestinian women that may not involve their family members, as in the case of the murder of Reem Al-Qasem in Haifa. When she was killed the police immediately declared it a "family honor" killing. In an interview for *Haaretz* her sister disagreed, stating:

That's the easiest thing to say. I have never heard about it in my family; our girls go out of Israel to study. Reem was very accepted within the family and has good relationship with all the family members . . . The police don't even check if her killing was an attempted burglary or a criminal act . . . (cited in Awyadat, 2007)

In many cases, the police, as substantiated by our interview subjects and by the literature, do not treat the murder of Arab women as homicide cases, but as expressions of a cultural norm, or of "traditional" attitudes toward woman (as evidenced by the aforementioned policeman). As a source of much of the systematic oppression practiced against Palestinian communities, the Israeli police system is not particularly interested in preventing these killings.

It was further found that because the police system does not consider or document these cases as murder cases, the number of women killed is significantly higher than the statistics published by the police.¹⁰ The exception is cases in which a husband kills his wife, which are not the norm in "honor killings," most of which are committed by a brother or the father. Moreover, the Israeli legal system only considers femicide cases after the woman or girl has been murdered, and do not investigate cases of threats issued against a woman or girl's life prior to a potential murder. The interview subjects stated that in some cases the police act before a killing takes place to warn a girl or woman, but do not approach the men who made the threat. Even when they do pursue a case as a murder case, the murderers are often released from jail through pardons or plea bargains.¹¹ When a representative of the legal system is aware of the fact that the victim has the same family name as the man accused of murder, he or she may decline to investigate the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator any further. The response that these crimes elicit from the Israeli legal system in practice does little to deter men from murdering their female relatives.

On at least two recorded occasions, Al-Badeel, a women's rights organization, provided the Ramleh police department with a list of women who had received death threats from family members and who were not under police protection (Touma-Sliman, 2005). According to the chief *Imam* of the Big Mosque Ramleh, not only are these potential killers rarely deterred by the police system, but sometimes even celebrated as heroes in their family or within the community after the act of murder. In his words:

There are girls who do not go to the police because they see that the police don't do anything. They see killers who were taken to jail as killers and were released after less than 12 years and walking in the street like heroes . . . The girls don't trust the police any more . . .

Operating in parallel to the formal legal system, informal social systems, too, exercise control over women's lives, bodies, and sexualities. In the context of Ramleh, these systems were found to be divided into four categories. The first of these categories is represented in the head of each family, also referred to as "well-respected persons," the *Mukhtar* (the representative of each extended family or the community). The second category is religious individuals and the clergy. The third is "informal police brokers," and the fourth nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

In contemporary Palestinian society in Israel, the first group of actors—the heads of families and communities—are often leaders in a merely symbolic sense and do not take significant action to prevent a woman's murder. As the chief *Imam* of the Big Mosque in Ramleh stated:

These days those who used to be considered "well respected" and leading figures within society have no power . . . they are not what they once were, and they don't have the power to change or make decisions as they used to.

Moreover, these figures may concur with the decision to murder a woman by omission, that is, through their silence before, during and after the murder.¹² Until 1998 to 1999, there was in place in Ramleh an informal system of collaboration between the police and the "well-respected persons." There were even incidents of the police sending women under threat of femicide to these individuals for protection, and seeking their help in returning them to their families (Hassan, 1999; Touma-Sliman, 2005). Considering the power such figures have in determining who is to die and who is to live, this is a potentially lethal alliance. Indeed, the cost of cooperation between the police, other informal agents of social control, and family members is often the life of a woman or girl.

It was found that clergymen, the second group of actors, tend to intervene in "honor killings" only if they receive a request, be it from a family member, the woman herself, or the police. They regard these cases as "internal family issues" that are beyond the purview of their religious duties and authorities. In the various interviews we conducted, clergymen explained that they are against killing "in the name of honor" in principle, as an un-Islamic practice. They even stated that they preach against killing

during mourning rituals or Friday sermons, though they do not speak out explicitly on the issue of femicide.¹³ The data collected indicate that the prevailing approach adopted by this group toward threats to the lives of women and girls is to leave the family to resolve the issue internally. They believe that this approach is more effective than collaborating with the police or the formal legal system, and, crucially, protects the family from shame and “dishonor,” which may itself further endanger the lives of women.

The third group is the “informal police brokers,” who, according to the *Imam* of the Big Mosque of Ramleh, work in cooperation with the Israeli police. In other words, the police call on these individuals for their help in solving problems or resolving social conflict. According to interview subjects and analyses of textual data, these brokers are a group of Arab individuals from Ramleh who completed a course on restorative justice and conflict management over the past year at the Center for Restorative Justice and Arbitration in Ramleh, and subsequently decided to use the tools and skills they had gain in working with community leaders.¹⁴ However, the data gathered revealed that no informal group in Ramleh is capable of acting to prevent the murders of women. Indeed, it is contended that many of their attitudes and beliefs encourage these murders. When women asked for their assistance, in most cases, “They didn’t help; women can’t trust them anymore,” as one woman from Al-Gawareesh testified (cited in Zinger-Heruti, 2007d). The cases reveal systematic control by the males of society, civilians and representatives of the various informal systems alike, over Palestinian women’s lives as a whole, especially their sexuality.

The fourth informal system that plays a key role in cases of femicide in Ramleh is NGOs, and more specifically women’s human rights organizations. According to individuals working in the field, the activism of these organizations in femicide cases focuses both on preventing the killings from taking place and documenting them after the event. In most cases, efforts at preventing the killings are made in collaboration with formal systems, including the police and welfare department (which operates within the municipality of Ramleh). These efforts include attempts to remove the woman or girl under threat from her home and place her in a shelter. It was found that the NGOs focus their intervention on the threatened women, and not their potential murderers. Thus their work is decontextualized. In addition, several organizations run hot-lines for women confronting domestic violence. However, while these services may go some way to preventing GBV, because the NGOs operating them are bound by the law and because the law enforcement agencies, including the police, are often reluctant to intervene, a number of cases dealt with by NGOs ended in the murder of the woman or girl.¹⁵ There are furthermore difficult questions to be asked about the efficacy of the human rights framework employed by such NGOs, particularly regarding their construction of women as “victim-subject” and their (generally inadvertent) simplification of the complexities of women’s lives under the single rubric of rights.

Discussion: Femicide and the Modalities of Power

This study has revealed that femicide constitutes one of the modalities of power in colonized areas. The silence and silencing that surrounds the crime and the descent

into the intimacy of madness it entails (the killing of family members), reproduce its epistemology of power and assist it in its quest for greater power, which makes its crudeness one of its main modes of existence. It is within the confines of segregated colonial space and the vulgarity of tyranny and violence that one must analyze femicide in the Palestinian context in Israel.

Killing women in the act of femicide, whatever degree of pain it involves, appears to constitute a modality of power that has no other purpose than death. The killing itself—the execution as examined by Foucault—is a public, highly visible act. The killers' need to define themselves by ending the life of a female relative makes the act a public performance, designed to impress and make them heroes within the family and close community. The performative aspect of the act demands that it should appear impulsive and intimate, in order to showcase the male power of domination. This expression of domination manifests in both the acts themselves as perpetrated by Arab-Palestinian men and the unwillingness on behalf of the Israeli formal legal system to intervene in cases of femicide.

The current study illustrates that the various actors—the clergy, the police, representatives of the various systems of justice and social control among others—do not function in a vacuum but rather within an economy of death and dying. The study confirms the need to pay a closer look at the way the structure, politics and economy of death function in colonized spaces and contexts. Researching femicide in the context of the Palestinian minority in Israel has clearly demonstrated the need to go beyond the internal institutions of society, beyond the written rules and laws, and beyond formal positions of power. It has also shown that one must examine how the colonialism and segregation are interwoven with the “intimate” and Otherized bodies of women, both live and dead.

Studying femicide in the context of Palestinian society inside Israel reveals that most of the actors who intervene and most of the individuals who address the crime are males. It is males as the patriarchal structure who plan, who implement, who turns a blind eye to women's needs, who silence abuse, who fail to address women's call for help, and who are able to stop the killing; females are mostly used as means to an end. This male control over women's lives, bodies and sexuality is, we contend, strengthened by the “culturalization” and “Otherization” of the Palestinian people as a whole. In Israel, the work of state institutions and NGOs are confined to the relationship with the state's laws and law enforcement systems. The Israeli formal systems view Palestinian men and women (supposed “citizens”) through an Orientalist, colonial lens as potential terrorists who pose a “security” threat to the state. This colonized-masculine context compounds the strategy of divide and rule employed by the Israeli law enforcement system to co-opt internal actors, weaken society, and strengthen traditional and patriarchal-tribal practices.

The analyses, policies and strategies of the official governmental institutions and NGOs lie outside the colonized context in which the killing takes place, while most of the interventions and preventions were conducted with women, despite the greater need to work with/against the system, the masculine and colonized structure, and individual men themselves. The study brought to light how the local Israeli police absolve

themselves of their responsibilities by arguing that femicide is a social phenomenon embedded in Arab-Palestinian society. NGOs and feminist activists stressed that the police reacted only after the killing has been committed. The police further argued that the local community refuses to assist their inquiries, and that they are therefore powerless to combat so-called "honor crimes." This spurious and disingenuous claim depoliticizes the actual context in which femicide takes place and denies the difficulties that Palestinian individuals face when they cooperate with the Israeli law enforcement system. It further nullifies the very important and dangerous work that feminist and women's rights organizations carry out in their attempts to assist women victims, the local community and the police. As has been seen, such actors have in various instances provided the Israeli law enforcement system with lists of the names of women threatened with femicide. The data collected uncovered the fact that in most cases men, like women, also reject the killings. The women have even testified before the courts against the killers, as did a group of women from the Abu Ghanem family from Ramleh. In this case, the mother testified against her son and attested that it was he who had killed her daughter. Nevertheless, the court charged him as an accessory to murder and not a murderer. The murder of Palestinian women, it was found, is conceived of as an internal Palestinian social and cultural phenomenon, a view that allows the Israeli authorities to pardon themselves of all responsibility for its prevention.

When the police do intervene in a threatened femicide, which is generally in response to a request made by a human rights or women's rights organization, they do so by taking the woman or girl to a shelter. They remove her from her neighborhood and her family, and in so doing it was found that they increased the possibility of her murder as a direct result of her removal. Thus a woman or girl from Al-Gawareesh, for example, faces fourfold exclusion: first as a marginalized woman in a patriarchal society; second as colonized woman and member of the Palestinian minority in Israel; third as a resident of the marginalized Al-Gawareesh neighborhood of Ramleh; and fourth as women living in shelters for abused women. This act of removal/exclusion also increases the risk to a woman's life. Moreover, who wants to live their life in a shelter as a fugitive from murder? And who wants to live away from their children, sisters, and mother? It is therefore no surprise that most girls and women choose to return to their homes, despite the danger that lies in wait for them.

It was found that social and religious institutions, too, absolved themselves of responsibility for femicide. Religious leaders intervened only when they were asked to do so on the pretext that "honor crimes" are a family matter. Furthermore, even when they do intervene they use their own methods, which are incompatible with those employed by the Israeli authorities. The impoverishment of the neighborhood of Al-Gawareesh in Ramleh stokes social tensions and emotional instability, which in turn raises the potential for violence that is exercised by the powerful (men and state agencies) against the marginalized and vulnerable (women).

The men whom Israel has appointed as reformers in order to allow it to intervene in the internal affairs of the Arabs in Ramleh are no more than a group of intermediaries, in Fanon's (1968) terminology. They work with the community leadership, the *Mukhtar* or *Sheikh*, man to man, to decide the fate of a woman. They have black skin

but wear white masks. Their appointment is a means through which the police absolve themselves of their responsibilities and a way of further excluding the Other.

Thus an array of formal and informal institutions, governmental, social, and community-based, claim to work to bring an end to femicide among the Palestinian community in Israel. However, the work of these organizations is ultimately not stopping the killings. Each feeds into the other, and they work together as a network that women fall inside, while the killers remain outside.

Finally, shifts that have occurred at the global level since the events of September 11, 2001, including the portrayal of Islam as a religion of terrorism and violence, have lent Israel greater legitimacy in dealing with the Palestinian Muslim as a violent, “primitive” person. This in turn has granted Israel greater legitimacy in its approach to femicide as a “cultural language and practice” in which it has no role to play in developing prevention policies. This approach is a clear manifestation of colonialism and Orientalism. It is prefigured as a relationship that is an instance of “white men saving brown women from brown men,” as Spivak (1988, p. 33) would put it; a relationship between the oppressed Palestinian woman and the white man who has colonized her, and whom she expects to rescue her from her “violent” and “barbaric” Palestinian man. Close examination of the triangle of the victimized colonized Palestinian woman, the dangerous colonized Palestinian man, and the civilized white Israeli may help us to challenge the “color line” that differentiates the modern from the premodern, the colonized from the “civilized.” This line is particularly destructive in the Palestinian case, against the backdrop of the Israeli “security theology,” its segregative ideologies and the War on Terror.

Conclusion

The study of crimes in colonized zones must never be divorced from the political contexts and workings of power that envelop them. The history of colonized societies and conflict zones are replete with examples of how hegemonic power-holders from both sides—the colonizer and the colonized—have used women’s bodies and sexuality to empower themselves. Projects of colonization aim at excluding the Other, and colonization through racial segregation scripts domination over bodies and the land. The manipulation of women’s bodies, sexuality, and spaces (including the domestic space) was found in this research to be one of the methods employed in order to colonize the Other.

The case study of Ramleh examined reveals how the parallel social/tribal legal systems have been maneuvered by the colonial power—Israel—and used as tools to entrench its own power and exercise control over land, minds and bodies, using women’s bodies and sexualities as the tool and the site of violence. By turning the colonized land into *terra nullius* (“land belonging to no one”), colonial power-holders were found to create the possibility for violence to occur in violated spaces. The parallel legal system (like many other indigenous social systems) tries, within its own domain, to resist colonial violence. In doing so, it exercises its power in order to regain lost influence, generating counter-power through practices such as controlling women’s bodies and movement. The colonization of the Jewish state, and the reactions of

internal patriarchal power-holders to these processes, have exposed the lives of Palestinian women to danger and subjugation at the hands of these power holders.

Studying the crime of femicide in colonized zones requires that one pay close attention to the spiral method in which global and colonial politics intertwine with body politics; a spiral method which, in the case of Palestinians inside Israel, is fuelled by spatial segregation, social exclusion, economic disadvantage, and historical uprooting, among others. It entails that one examine all relevant biopolitical, geopolitical, psychosocial, and historical factors. The racism embedded in the politics of exclusion and politics of control revealed femicide to be prevalent within politically, geographically, socially, and economically marginalized and excluded groups. It was also found that both the offenders and victims came from these marginalized and excluded communities. It is contended that Israel's racialized colonization and ethno-centrism (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003)—which is equally challenged and supported by those who wield the “culture of control,” including human rights and women's organizations that entrust the task of tackling femicide to formal legal systems alone—has created a local state of exclusion and exception within Palestinian society in which GBV and especially violence against women is exercised, normalized, and even encouraged. Considering that strategies which do not acknowledge the contexts and configurations of colonization seldom undermine the structures and practices that give rise to and perpetrate abuses against women (Razack, 2004), it is imperative that this wider issue of Israeli colonization and its effects on the minority Palestinian community be confronted and challenged in the fight against GBV in general, and femicide in particular. To turn a blind eye to the effects of spatial segregation and patriarchal domination on women in colonized contexts is to dance with denial—a dance which, to our knowledge, is a crime almost equal to that of femicide itself.

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Notes

1. The data in this article were collected between the years 2007 and 2009 through research conducted by the Coalition for Social and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR)

- project, which was hosted and financed by Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) organization.
2. The terminology employed when the murdered woman is Jewish. When the murdered woman is Palestinian, the formal Israeli systems and Israeli media refer to the act as "killing on the ground of family honor."
 3. It was impossible to interview family members or women threatened by femicide themselves, due to the risks both to ourselves as researchers and to the women.
 4. Israelis, both formally and informally, refer to the Palestinian minority living within their midst as "the Arab sector." We view this designation as an act of political naming aimed at marginalizing the Palestinian identity, and as symptomatic of ignorance towards the Palestinian entity as whole.
 5. See the 2006 report of *Shdulat Nashim Organization* at: <http://www.asimon.co.il/ArticlePage.aspx?AID=3955&AcatID=42#At> (In Hebrew).
 6. An interview conducted with the chief *Imam* of the Big Mosque in Ramleh on August 27, 2008. All quotes in the article are from this interview.
 7. Also according to the Director of the Young Women's Public Centre in Ramleh, from an interview conducted on April 16, 2008.
 8. Statement made at the "Women and Girls in Ramleh and Lydda" conference.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. See the 2006 report of the *Shdulat Nashim Organization*.
 11. See the research report prepared by Wertzberger (2001) from the research and data center of the Knesset, introduced to the committee for developing women's position in Israel (in Hebrew).
 12. From an unplanned interview with Aida Touma-Sliman, the General Director of WAV, on March 24, 2007.
 13. From statements made by the *Imam* of the Big Mosque in Ramleh at the "Women and Girls in Ramleh and Lydda" conference.
 14. See the website of the Municipality of Ramleh: <http://www.ramla.muni.il/gisurr/activities.html> (in Hebrew).
 15. As stated by several speakers at the "Women and Girls in Ramleh and Lydda" conference, and by the *Imam* of the Big Mosque in Ramleh.

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