



Towards spaces that reflect us: Palestinian feminists seek safe places to meet

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Abstract: Many feminists in Palestine today urgently require safe spaces, not only physical but also in the mental and emotional sense, where they can meet and share ideas free from judgement or threat. However, there are many structural patriarchal barriers to overcome.

Especially among the young, there is a growing need for space, formal and informal, where imagination can flourish, where power can be challenged and redefined, where feminists can engage in collective learning to exchange experiences, build mutual understanding and deepen their perspectives through dialogue and reflection.

As part of this blog, I interviewed Haneen, a 31-year-old feminist activist from Hebron who holds a BA in Media and has worked with both local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the interview, she spoke about how she challenges social norms and stereotypes about Palestinian women through transformative storytelling. She says: ‘I have never been in a safe space of this kind, and I don’t feel that we have such spaces where we can speak and express ourselves.’ In Palestine, the formation of such spaces is often constrained by many limitations, starting with the lack of environments that truly provide

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safe, supportive non-judgmental expression. These obstacles are layered; they include external forces, such as a society that resists creating or accepting such spaces, especially for women, and internal fears carried by women themselves, shaped by social norms surrounding them. Creating safe spaces in this context requires more than intention; it requires deep trust, collective courage and a willingness to confront both structural and social pressures.

Despite the connection between the Palestinian feminist movement and the national struggle, feminism has continued to face entrenched cultural [barriers](#), most notably the patriarchal perception that limits women's public roles and sees them only as part of national identity. After Oslo, feminist work shifted toward 'state-building' and development goals, which [weakened](#) the focus on resistance and gender liberation. It turned into small economic projects that often hid the original problems. As a result, feminist safe spaces are seen as a [threat](#) to conservative society, especially when these challenge [traditional](#) gender norms, and are often associated with social fragmentation, increasing pressure on activists and restricting freedom of expression and assembly. Traditional political and religious power structures have played a role in undermining feminist efforts, as seen in actions by clans in the West Bank, such as those in Hebron, who warned against 'feminist institutions and their representatives' calling for [closure](#) and cancellation of rental contracts.

The demand for safe space is not new but has been building over years, shaped by ongoing shrinking of civic space, pressure to remain 'acceptable' to funders and expectation of compliance rather than autonomy. As Haneen says:

It's true that we talk about human rights, but I don't feel that we actually have those rights, especially right now. I mean, the most basic of our rights is the right to live with dignity, and I don't feel like we have that like people in other parts of the world. We don't have the right to movement, the right to life or any other right.

We often hear 'safe space' cited in donor language or organisational strategies, but for feminists, the meaning runs deeper. What's being demanded is the freedom to speak, reflect and grow without having to apologise for being angry, emotional or uncertain. It is about reclaiming room to define our own struggles, identities, and priorities on our terms.

Feminism without limits

A key factor in the absence of meaningful feminist space is the nature of funding. Much of the feminist and civil society work in Palestine has been shaped by external donors whose priorities are often predefined. Projects arrive ready-made, rooted in global agendas or trends, leaving little room for local communities, especially young feminists, to define what truly matters to them. Funding is also channelled to [humanitarian](#) assistance rather than development work, further constraining efforts to build sustainable, locally driven feminist initiatives.

As Haneen puts it:

Donors and project structures have shaped us to fit within certain boundaries, often limiting our freedom especially in specific contexts. Sometimes we find ourselves unable to say no, simply because the donor has already decided what should be done and we're expected to comply.

This makes the creation of feminist safe spaces even more critical, spaces that reflect who we are, emerging from lived feminist practice and rooted in our own realities, not external timelines or checklists. These are the spaces where we begin to recognise ourselves and each other, where we unpack our rights, speak freely about our struggles and link them to wider questions of justice.

Haneen adds:

We go to training, we attend them, and we feel one thing inside the training and something completely different outside it...External factors don't allow us to put into practice what we learned...We might gain a lot of valuable information, but I don't feel that this information has had a positive impact on us as individuals.

Many of us hold questions and visions that go beyond formal knowledge. What we need is not more technical training, but collective spaces for reflection, learning and exploration, spaces that help us navigate the complexities of our daily lives. This need is grounded in a deep belief in the legitimacy of our experiences and our demands.

Structural silence and the price of speaking up

The absence of safe spaces today is the result of long-term conditions that have shaped feminist and civil society work, leaving feminists struggling to survive in constrained environments instead of creating spaces for expression and learning. In this context, the silence many feminists experience is not personal, it is deeply structural. At the heart of this silence is the patriarchal system, which operates through fragmentation, division, discrimination and deliberate narrowing of spaces available to women. This system limits not only physical space but also freedom to speak, connect and grow as a collective.

As Haneen says:

One of the biggest obstacles we face is the pressure of traditions and social norms, especially in more conservative areas, where people question what we're doing and the issues we're discussing. Creating safe spaces requires deep trust; we need to feel confident that what is shared will remain private. Yet, even within these spaces, not everything we need is always available.

This reflects a broader social reality. 'In some locations, communities have resisted women's empowerment groups, fearing that these programmes would lead women to become disobedient to their husbands, fathers, and [brothers](#)'. These societal fears reinforce the stigma around feminist spaces and make it even more difficult for women to gather, express themselves freely, or build collective power without judgement or backlash. Therefore, as feminists, we need safe spaces that help us build knowledge horizontally and learn from our personal experiences, away from theoretical frameworks. These spaces allow us to review feminist history and learn from it, recognising that we have been marginalised throughout history and that our voices and legitimate demands can have an impact.

Toward spaces that reflect us

Despite all the obstacles feminists face and the fact that reviving safe spaces is not simple, having a genuine local will among women to create change will contribute to establishing and initiating these spaces. In addition, strengthening and supporting horizontal collective learning, especially between generations, will enable women to learn from personal experiences and mistakes and build upon them. Finally, there must be demands for flexible funding that empowers and supports free voices to ensure that women's activism remains local and truly reflects the women themselves.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the West Bank have made the idea of 'safe space' feel more distant than ever, but also more necessary. Nearly one in four safe spaces in Gaza that provide life-saving psychosocial support and referrals have [shut down](#). In the West Bank, women- and girls' safe spaces have reached over 3,000 individuals with GBV risk mitigation, prevention, and response services, including [mental health](#) and psychosocial support, case management, and informational sessions. In moments of destruction, disconnection, and displacement, safe spaces are lifelines for survival, mental health, and strength. In a time of surveillance, shrinking funding, and trauma, feminist spaces grounded in care and autonomy are essential.

The importance of collective learning lies in how these spaces bring us together around shared struggles and a common goal. They remind us that there is still so much work to be done and many capable, passionate women ready to drive meaningful change. By doing so together, young feminists can start to reimagine what safety, solidarity and shared struggle truly mean.