

Language and Voice in Dialogue Encounters

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This article reflects on the findings of a research that demonstrates and analyses the unequal gender relations between men and women in dialogue encounters between the Palestinians and the Jewish Israelis. It maps out gender inequality in peace dialogue encounters focusing on the issue of language, as a symbol of national discourse vs. gender discourse. This article resorts to gender analysis in order to examine the experiences of Palestinian and Jewish men and women, group facilitators and participants in dialogue encounters which have taken place during the last 10 years. The qualitative research featured in this article addresses two main themes that were raised by the 22 facilitators and the 12 participants interviewed for the research.



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Voices in Dialogue Encounters

The female participants in the dialogue encounter do not have feminine terminologies or even the “legitimacy” to use the female form of verbs and adjectives in Hebrew and Arabic. However, they do find ways to project a strong and clear voice in the encounter group. This paper shall examine this voice as a sub-chapter and look into its origins and more specifically, its meanings and effects on these sub-groups.

Palestinian female participants are often very vocal while the Palestinian males oftentimes do not express their true opinion in order to be liked by the Jewish participants, mainly the female ones. The Jewish voice is hardly described, but is perceived as the hegemonic voice – it is obvious that it is being heard and used.¹ Noam, a 27-years-old female Jewish participant echoes these observations regarding language and voice:

Girls were generally more hesitant to speak English, because they were ashamed of making mistakes (I think) – especially Arab girls. Males usually talked more than females, but the thing I remember most is that there were many interruptions during group conversation, and it was much more acceptable for a male to interrupt the other. A girl who interrupted was seen as pushy and “dominant” in a negative way. Boys usually spoke louder and longer than girls. I also think girls tended to revert to their native language (Hebrew or Arabic) more often than boys when they were missing a word in English.²

Michael Zak’s chapter on gender and nationality in dialogue encounters in her book, *When the Present are Absent*, is a detailed research into the dynamics of dialogue encounters between Jews and Palestinians. It described how the Palestinian female participants and the Jewish female participants took much more responsibility in the group in voicing their needs and opinions. They took strong leadership positions, which did not reflect their realities in the Palestinian nor in Jewish societies.³

Zak highlighted the fact that the majority of the participants in the encounters were females and that they cooperated quite actively with the group facilitators and the research team. They shared

their views with the group during the interviews with them, before and after the encounter. Zak attributed this phenomenon to the female participants’ higher dialogue ability, in addition to the interest that the male Palestinian participants manifested in the Jewish female participants instead of in the dialogue itself.

This chapter in Zak’s book dedicated to gender is extremely short, about one and a half (1.5) page out of 86 pages dealing with issues of transparency in encounters. However short, it is almost the only account of a gender analysis of dialogue encounters between Jews and Palestinians in Israel.

Zak is one of the leading researchers on dialogue encounters in Israel. The observations that a small part of the book is dedicated to gender, that most of the participants were females and most of the group work in the dialogue was done by the female participants lead to an important conclusion. This is an indication that gender analysis in general, and gender discourse on language in particular, do not occupy a major space within the dialogue encounter’s academic research sphere as much as within the encounters themselves. It echoes and highlights the invisibility of the gender aspect of the conflict on all levels - language, voice and identity.

This state of affairs leaves women with 2 extreme options to express their voices. They may adopt the masculine form of language, culture and identity by resorting to loudness and extreme firmness in adopting the national voice rather than use their personal voice, or, they are pushed into the extreme passive silence which is negatively associated to women as falling into the stereotyped quiet and silent Palestinian women.⁴ Both options are perceived negatively by the other sub-groups and facilitators. The question is, why do they resort to these expressions of voice?

In Zak’s interviews, the female Palestinian participants expressed the feeling that the Palestinian male participants “sold” the Palestinian struggle over the Jewish female participants as they left the question on the Palestinian cause hanging.⁵ Isra, a 21-year-old female Palestinian former participant and now a facilitator comments:

We were the only ones from the Palestinian group who talked about us girls. It was hard but we did it very well, we showed them (Israeli Jews). We voiced the Palestinian voice and pain - put it to their faces, I felt and thought they needed to hear that so they will not be able to say 'I didn't know'!⁶

The strong clear voice that represents the Palestinian struggle is carried by the female Palestinian participants to the extreme. They feel that they need to shout their opinion. They are speaking of a long time, although some of them never talked with Israeli Jews before, and they feel that everything needs to be said at the encounter. Tarik, a male Palestinian facilitator observes:

*The Palestinian women are the representatives of the militant radical even violent Palestinian position of what should be the Palestinian struggle. They are silencing the Palestinian male participants to win their place and position in the group in forceful ways.*⁷

In the dialogue encounter jargon, the terms used in the above quote - 'forceful ways' and 'silencing' – carry the negative meaning of undermining the 'other', taking more space in the group, and using more of the group's resources such as time, energy, and space. However, this is not the case when checked against the actual representation of the subgroup of Palestinian female participants. Amir, a 19-year-old male Palestinian participant observes:

*I was there, and the girls, our girls, were yelling and misbehaving and not respecting the group. They were right but each of us were there for different reasons. The Jews came to get to know us and to become friends. They were nice. We could just play and have fun with them. The Palestinian girls were making it hard for us to become friends with them.*⁸

Why the Shouting?

Conflict situations often cause women to be ignored, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no exception. Women in Palestine who support the struggle can cheer and support male heroism in a militant manner. However in most cases, they can do more and much more is open to them.

Cynthia Cockburn noted that the masculine side of war is usually the only one presented in the press, mass media and textbooks while the role and place of women in armed conflict has not been studied enough.⁹ Women do not have a voice so their language, history and narratives are not told in the media nor in most academic researches in Israel, Palestine and worldwide. Recent feminist researches have shown that women support men in warfare. They play complementary roles to the warriors, and they often stumble into this role without a choice.¹⁰ Simona Sharoni, a leading expert on gender and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict writes:

*Women play specific roles in maintaining militarism. Women are praised when they follow the dichotomised social roles and accept their tasks as reproducers and caretakers.*¹¹

Awatef, a 22-year-old female participant echoes Sharoni's claim:

*I felt that I need to fight them and to show them who we are (i.e. the Palestinian people). I represented an even more radical opinion than that which I hold myself. I wanted them to know that I am a fighter, that we are fighters, that our men, the Palestinian men – who currently don't talk - will fight for Palestine.*¹²

Tarik reports on what happens when women try to shift from the militaristic male-dominated discourse:

The feminine voice is lacking in our work. We are not paying attention to it. We are mirroring analytical moral statements and not emotional nostalgic ones. I feel that we discourage feminine statements, solutions, narratives and of course language.

He goes on to give a hint for the reason of such act of ignoring:

One Jewish female participant wanted to talk in the female form. The group thought it is childish and not relevant, and in the end of the process she felt that too. She was convinced that the gender language is not relevant nor important in the encounter. The female participants are starting with feminine language and statements, talking

*about fathers, brothers, friends who were killed. The male participant do not or can't hear it so they deconstruct, analyze and pressure women to say that the men and women who were killed were heroes who died for 'us' - whatever the national group is.*¹³

Ira Shor and Paulo Friere argue that observing power structures, symbols and mechanisms can give us an insight on who control society, who is dominating whom and why they hold the power do so. What do they gain from their control of power over others?¹⁴ In addition, this observation of the dominant group can teach us the ways to operate and maintain power over other subgroups. Shor and Freire further argue that uncovering the transparency of this group is the first step to changing the power structures, suggesting that by uncovering them, we are able to understand the mechanisms behind them.¹⁵

The fact that a certain group cannot use their language in the dialogue encounter carries with it a meaning. Much like in the case of a national language which is a leading trace in uncovering the control and dominance of one subgroup over another through the use of language.

Male Culture and Militarism

The accepted legitimate discourse in the Israel-Palestine conflict is a militarist one. Spencer defines militarism as the spirit and traditions of military life.¹⁶ Gor Ziv defines militarism as "same powers, maneuvers and discourse extending from the military to civilian life and education system."¹⁷ A militarist discourse encourages the heroism of dying, and rejects the notion of positive peace in its broadest sense.¹⁸ In a militaristic culture, one of the main gender roles expected from women is to be in their bodies, mind and behavior – the representation of the national pride so perceived across enemy lines to the extent that hurting the enemy's women is parallel to inflicting harm to the enemy's national pride and honor.¹⁹

In this conflict situation, women are assigned the role of the ones protected by men, the role of having to need protection and thus help in boosting their protector's manliness. Men, on their end, learn that by protecting their personal

and national women (their sisters, mothers, wives, daughters, and any woman of the nation), they protect the national pride and honor as well as fulfill their role as 'men'.²⁰

In a positive peace discourse, people's full potential and needs are fulfilled.²¹ In the case of dialogue encounters, it would mean that a participant can raise an issue and talk about it with the rest of the group in a respectful way that values opinion. It further means that she will be able to express herself fully in her language, in her voice, in her own way without having to withdraw to the dominant language and take her place in the protected-protector divide in order to be heard.

A militaristic discourse sanctions those who choose this path, reducing their thoughts, ideas and feelings into negative categories like 'women talk' or 'emotional mish-mash,' perceived as non-political and non-relevant. In extreme violent context, the use of a feminine language to communicate across national lines is considered as a betrayal, and in a way, it means not allowing men to take the role of the protectors defending the nation's pride.²²

Not only male participants see this as a betrayal. The Palestinian male facilitators themselves conceive of the gender discourse as harming and betraying the Palestinian national cause. Yotam, a 38 year-old male Jewish facilitator comments:

We were in a weekend of facilitators' training for a bi-national organisation. When it came to discussing gender it was pretty frustrating for me. The Palestinian males felt intimidated. When we talked about the connection between militarism and sexism. They said things like 'I am for gender equality, but I don't see its relevance to this dialogue'.

One of the Palestinian women shared with us that she's deconstructing the gender identity in her group. She thought she should do the same with national identity, to see that it is not becoming an oppressing identity against women. The Palestinian men fiercely attacked her and accused her of hurting the cause. For the Palestinian case, this is national empowerment and building up of identity, rather than deconstruction. She was then

attacked by other Palestinian women, while we (male Jews) just said nothing. Finally, since the only person to back her up was a Jewish woman, she retreated, practically apologized, and said she understood that she had hurt the cause.²³

In terms of militarism and positive peace, it seems that when it comes to letting out the national voice and taking the place of their silent male peers, the female Palestinian participants take the only path open to them. They are taking responsibility over the representation of the male oriented national discourse which represents their nation's pride and honor, neglecting their own personal voice. But it seems they lose either way as they are accused of irrelevance, aggressiveness or betrayal.

Deafening Silence

They do not speak. They don't say a word but they sit closely together, half a circle of them Palestinian female participants, like a frontier. Their silence is very loud in the group. (Pnina, 35-years-old female Jewish facilitator)²⁴

When they do not take a very masculine, strong, militant voice, the female Palestinian participants are left with only one choice, the dichotomised option which means giving up their voice, remaining completely silent, and acting out their opinion and positions in this kind of behavior.

These two dichotomous behaviours reflect the two classic options that women have had historically. One option is to conform with the masculine discourse, assume a male-like behaviour and way of talking, and be rewarded with one's inclusion in a the male-dominated society, but is still perceived negatively as 'behaving like a man'. The other option is to remain silent, not voicing-out their opinions, not communicating their needs, ideas and emotions, resorting to non-verbal communication, but are generally perceived negatively as manipulative and weak, 'like women'.²⁵

Going back to the concept of radical translation,²⁶ both behaviours can be explained by the disappointment of not succeeding in the translation of their concept map.

A group silence can give feminine power to the female Palestinian participant group. It is like a

civil disobedience act or an act of demonstration which can have a solidifying effect for their sub-group, even though the rest of the group sees them as using a non- legitimate method of communication. Dina, a 19-years-old female Palestinian participant explains:

I didn't have any voice in this group. It did not matter to anyone that I didn't say anything, I was ignored. Even when the Jewish group asked the Palestinian female participants, why don't we talk about it? I didn't react. I felt it is useless. They didn't understand me on so many level... but I felt strong at not saying anything. Even when we were asked for our opinion, we didn't react. I felt that no one is listening to me anyway.²⁷

In another venue of her interview she shares:

I listen and listen but no one hears me. I was listening but couldn't say what I want. I wasn't sure what I want. I felt that even when I am talking, the group was not listening to me.²⁸

The expectations and interests of the dialogue encounter are fundamentally different among the different gender groups and national groups. Their intended silence is an act of demonstration against their Palestinian peers, as much as against the Jewish sub-group. Palestinian males in this case are very much in line with the hegemonic Jewish interests and expectations of getting to know each other and making new friends. They are in conflict of interests with the female Palestinian participants who have a need to represent their Palestinian voice. Amir a 20-years-old male Palestinian participant echoes these expectations:

It was quiet, annoying. I wasn't allowed to go out, smoke, talk and get to know the girls. No one said anything. I faded out. I thought of other things and wasn't there in my mind. I just waited for the session to end. I know the Palestinian girls will say what needs to be said in the end. I just wanted to make friends there.²⁹

On one hand, Amir agrees politically with the Palestinian female participants. He trusts them to 'do the job' they came to do, as Palestinians. On the other hand, he is affected by the strong expectations and interest of the Jewish group to have fun and to choose the dominant group over



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his national group. Galia, a 38-years-old female Jewish facilitator, goes even further in interpreting the act of silence as an act of rebellion:

The whole group is waiting for someone from the subgroup to represent and they acted as if they were not there. It attracted a lot of attention and was regarded as a mini rebel move on their part.³⁰

The facilitators are often trying to encourage the subgroup of the Palestinian female participants to talk and express themselves, a method which generates even more attention to the fact that they do not say anything. This strategy brings to surface some very hard feelings. Few of the Jewish participants who were interviewed and actually lived the experience said that the silence is painful and humiliating. For example:

We wanted to hear what they had to say but they kept quiet. It was very difficult. I felt this pain in my stomach like I did something wrong and I felt that I am angry at them for making me feel that way. I started to ignore them and talked only with the Palestinian boys who were really nice to me.³¹

The female Palestinian participants' silence creates more complexity in the group as the Jewish female participants feel that they are forced to talk only with the male Palestinian participants because of this overpowering silence. However, the female Palestinians assert that this happens because of the Palestinian male participants' interest in the Jewish women. This was a convenient excuse to continue being deafeningly silent.

Thus, silence, much like silencing, creates a circle which reinforces a deeper, fuller silence and exclusion. The opportunity for a gender-based solidarity to create space for the gender language is missed. This is the power of silence in the purview of hegemony. It is used all the more to silence the dominated groups, preventing them to see the possibility of solidarity, and further reinforcing these power relations and structures.³²

The aforementioned misunderstanding can be interpreted as a problem of radical cultural translation. We can also learn from the observation of Dina, a 19-year-old female Palestinian participant:

I was very angry with the Jewish girls who came with exposed tops and got all the boys' attentions. I was extremely upset with the Palestinian boys who were only interested in the girls and did not voice the Palestinian ideas.³³

In de Saussure's terms, the signifier is the top. The metaphorically signified meaning is freedom, liberalism and also, bodily temptation. The Jewish female participants are using it, at least in the eyes of the Palestinian female participants, in order to divert the Palestinian males' attention and divert their political will to represent the Palestinian views and causes in the dialogue. Since the feminine language is silenced, and with it, the possibility of a cross-national gender dialogue, the female Palestinian participants have only the Palestinian males' behavior to base their assumptions on, as implied in Tarik's observation:

Both the Jewish and the Palestinian female participants are using the militarist voice in the group. They are talking like representatives of the masculine voice that is at that time busy looking at the Jewish girls.³⁴

His observation is affirmed by Johina, a 37 year-old female Palestinian facilitator:

The silence of the female Palestinian participants is present in the dialogue group and also in the unilateral sessions. However, the silence at the bi-national sessions is felt much stronger as they just sit there, upset, almost exploding and observing their national male participants peers - their oppressors, who are like saying, I am sorry but little puppies are sitting in the group.³⁵

Thus, the voice of the female Palestinian subgroup is heard beneath their silence. They are talking without really talking, explaining with their silence what they would like to bring to the group such as, "you Jews and Palestinian males are ignoring us, so we will ignore you back and would not collaborate in this process of learning together." Thus, they are stating very clearly that they are here but will not take active part and will only sit there without saying a word. According to Lakoff, this gesture can be read as a women's language.³⁶

Furthermore, the rude term Johina used in her interview is something she has heard in her group

but felt that she has to apologise for using it. Ira Shore and Paulo Freire would call this gesture as internalisation of oppression and would talk about the political power in a word such as those uttered to the Palestinian female sub group.³⁷ Lakoff, on the other hand, would argue that politeness and being very polite is a classical form of women language.³⁸ In other words, Shore and Freire's insistence on talking about everything might function as just another mechanism to silence women's voices.

Silenced by Deconstruction, Different Backgrounds

Derrida argues that the act of deconstruction is a liberating act.³⁹ It goes to show that when it comes to the juxtaposition of gender and nationality, deconstruction might function as a silencing rather than a liberating act. It can be argued that this is the case with the female Jewish participants as illustrated by Bar, a 26 year-old female Jewish participant who says:

*I listened all day and heard everything there is to hear from the Palestinian participants. I heard that my country is horrible, that we are all horrible occupiers and that my country is doing terrible things to their people. Now what? What can I do about that?*⁴⁰

Liat, a 30 year-old female Jewish facilitator adds:

*It was only in the end that they started to talk (the Jewish female participants). When we started to share our experiences and think of a model Palestinian-Jewish friendship, they really started to communicate.*⁴¹

Another aspect of the female Jewish participants' silence relates to issues of race, age and socio-economic backgrounds.⁴² The female Palestinian participants are often coming from a lower social-economic bracket as reflected in their schooling background and their language ability. This is even more enhanced when they are pushed to using Hebrew in the masculine form, which is their 4th language, or worse, English, which is their 5th language.

Jean Anyon who did a research on five elementary schools over the course of a full school year

concluded that fifth graders of different economic backgrounds are already being prepared to occupy certain ranks on the social ladder. Already in fifth grade, they use the language of the lowest economic class that they learned in school and as a result, it is quite difficult for them to express themselves fully.⁴³

In her book *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationships*, Carol Gilligan writes about a group of young women from different ethnic backgrounds who need to find their own voice in order to communicate among themselves. They did not have a language of their own as they were using the dominant hegemonic language of the majority while they were an oppressed minority on every level, mainly poor and from different schooling background.⁴⁴

Gilligan argued that as women of color in a white hegemonic society, their ability to express their feelings in their own words has been long gone. She wrote about the bravery of these young women and about the process of finding their voices. She found that for them, it is easier to break the silence as female adolescents, and to talk and share, when they were interacting with older women who could express themselves fully and share their experiences openly with them.⁴⁵

Liat's next statement is a vivid example of Gilligan's theory about breaking the silence. She describes hers and her Palestinian co-facilitator's act of modeling as they opened the conversation to sharing painful experiences of the violent Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She says:

*We were sharing, talking about ourselves, our own narratives and experiences in life. Then they start to share as well. Women talking, sharing their painful stories about life, men and war. The fact that we could talk and be friends shows a Palestinian –Jewish strong, loving friendship that could help deal with the pain.*⁴⁶

Finding their mutual voice and a mutually-gendered language requires a certain trust-building process. The mistrust may be connected to the distorted perception of having different backgrounds, for example, in the clothes that the

Jewish female participants wear. Natalia, a 38 year-old female Jewish facilitator comments:

This is a classic phenomenon when you face women's groups. You would expect that you'll find a gender discourse there because it's possible. But the discourse is often about nationality. The nationality debate occupies most of the group's time. It feels as if when women meet, they come to talk about Jews and Palestinians, about nationality and not about gender.

I think that when we are dealing with a progressive group of women, it's possible to open-up on other things, to shift the discourse to topics other than nationality. There is an option and the openness to discuss other issues. But this is only possible in groups that trust each other and have worked together for years. Otherwise, from what I remember, there is no chance.⁴⁷

Only a deep trust allows the female participants to bridge their national, cultural, racial and socio-economic gaps.

Conclusion

The female participants' ability to express themselves in a calm and reasonable way is challenged due to the following reasons:

Their feminine way of speaking and use of language is not palpable for most of the dialogue encounter groups. The feminine language - spoken and metaphorical, is perceived as emotional, nostalgic, complaining or whining while the hegemonic masculine analytical national language is conceived as strong, powerful and more appropriate, whether used by a male or a female.

Reference to the dichotomous, militaristic and conflict-prone masculine language and discourse

prevents the female participants from thinking together of a more holistic and creative solution. They are stacked in the gender divide between the protector and the protected. This divide pushes them to be the presenters of either the heroic masculine voice or of extreme silence. This leaves them no space or time to communicate their personal female narratives.

The militaristic discourse and vocabulary are bound on using a high tone of voice, which is perceived negatively as signifying to the group that they are giving up on the attempt to communicate their subgroup's needs and views.

The lack of a language that would allow them to bridge the national, cultural and social divide, creates and deepens the mistrust which already exists on a national level.

The silence of the Palestinian female participants is a sign of mistrust, a way to send a strong and clear message to the subgroup of male Palestinian participants and also to the Jewish group as a whole. Although perceived negatively, this is their way, almost their only way, to speak and express their needs and ideals.

The female Jewish participants are silenced by the Palestinian narratives but may react to their Palestinian peers' messages, whether spoken or communicated through silence. This boxes them in the militaristic, hegemonic discourse.

In long-term groups and in successful dialogue encounter processes, the facilitators are able to assist in the creation of a model for experience-sharing, and help form a fluid and meaningful space for the female participants to express their thoughts and converse among themselves. ■