

The Problems of Feminist Nationalism

In her article “On the New Global Feminism and the Family of Nations,” Inderpal Grewal writes of the discomfort she experienced when giving a presentation about women and human rights in the Sikh community to a “predominately male Sikh audience.” This audience did not desire to hear about violence within its own community, but was more receptive to a presentation about sexual violence perpetrated against Kashmiri women by Indian army personnel. The latter portrayal of human rights abuses against women, says Grewal, was more easily incorporated into the construction an ideology of masculine Sikh nationalism which conceives of women as “victims” who need “saving,” in “a heterosexual discourse of women as nation, as land, as property.” While the goal of ending human rights abuses against women is certainly admirable, such representations subordinate women and erase their agency—problematic from a feminist as well as a human rights viewpoint. Grewal examines an instance when human rights discourse was appropriated to further a masculine nationalist project which conflicted with her beliefs as a feminist. Do similarly problematic situations arise when an organization which self-identifies as feminist is allied with nationalism? Exploring this question, I will analyze the websites of the Israeli women’s organization Na’amat.

Na’amat is a Hebrew acronym for *Nashim Avdot Umitnadvot*, “Movement of Working Women and Volunteers.” The seven-page “Our history” section of Na’amat Canada’s website (<http://www.naamat.com>) provides insights into the organization’s nationalist and feminist projects. Na’amat’s narrative begins in the “early 20th century, after young Jewish pioneers came to Israel (then, a neglected province of the Ottoman Empire) to reclaim the land and create a Jewish national life in their ancestral home.” This portrayal of a “neglected province,” with no

mention of the people who lived there before the arrival of the “pioneers,” upholds the Zionist belief in the right of Jews to settle in Israel. By depicting Israel as an un-peopled wilderness—not as Palestine populated by Palestinians—the land is “reclaimed” rather than occupied. The pioneers turn “swamps and desert into livable towns and fertile farmland,” civilizing and thereby further legitimizing their moral claim to the formerly uninhabited land. This page is titled “In the beginning,” quoting the first words of Genesis. The overall effect of this section is to erase the history of Israel/Palestine, as well as to erase its pre-settlement inhabitants.

This problematic historical narrative also introduces Na’amat’s representations of women: “At a time when most women were relegated to kitchen and child-rearing duties, these founding [pioneer] women worked side by side with men.” While depicted as a progressive development, this statement also participates in a hierarchy of gender roles which subordinates feminine, “domestic” labor to “productive,” masculine manual labor. Elsewhere, however, Na’amat Canada states, “Our definition of ‘working women’ includes those who work at home caring for their children, as well as women who work outside the home.” In fact, this is a more egalitarian conception of gendered labor, which values the contributions of women both inside and outside of the home.

Na’amat USA also displays problematic conceptions of gender, stating on its “Who we are” page its dedication to “Creating an ever stronger global sisterhood through cyberspace.” This concept of “global sisterhood” has been criticized by feminist thinkers such as Audre Lorde, who wrote, in “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” “to imply... that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy.” In the context of this Israeli women’s organization, it is necessary to ask how Arab or Palestinian women fit into this conception of “global sisterhood.” In fact, the Na’amat

Canada website makes no mention of Arabs at all, consistent with its historical erasure of their presence. Na'amat USA does specifically address the issue of Arab women, on a page under its "Na'amat Israel" section, entitled "Work with Arab Women:" "NA'AMAT's partnership with Arab women goes back to 1954, when the movement started providing sewing, cooking and Hebrew language classes in Arab villages. Over the decades, NA'AMAT has built bridges of understanding and support between Jewish and Arab Israeli women." One problem which arises from this is the representation of the "Arab Israeli." This label effectively erases Arab women who might be uncomfortable being called "Israeli"—what about those women who consider themselves "Palestinian?" Does Na'amat only work with women who accept the national signifier "Israeli," or is it homogenizing Arab women into a single national identity? This depiction of the "Arab woman" also erases cultural and religious difference, positioning the "Arab woman" not as an individual who may be Christian, Muslim, or otherwise, but instead positioning her as a homogenous ethnic "other." Here, the act of "[building] bridges of understanding and support" is the mark of a "progressive Jewish women's organization" because this positioning of the "other" widens preconceived gulfs between imaginary, homogenized "Jewish" and "Arab" identities.

Elsewhere, however, Na'amat seems to take a more sensitive approach to heterogeneous identities, in an article from *Na'amat Woman Magazine*, which is reproduced on the site. This article, dated "Summer 2004," by Eetta Prince-Gibson, is titled "Despite Our Differences..." and opens, "Throughout the worst of violence in our city, for nearly three years, we — 14 Jewish, Muslim and Christian, Palestinian and Israeli Jerusalemites, members of the Women's Interfaith Dialogue Group — have continued to meet." Already this article seems to appreciate a greater range of religious and national identities. It goes on to explore the tensions inherent in such a

dialogue. However, all the women in this particular dialogue group are educated professionals: “a tour guide, several peace educators, a journalist, a dentist, a professor of English literature, school principles, a women’s public health adviser, a librarian and several graduate students.” This conception places primacy on “religious” and “cultural” identities, but does not incorporate identities based on class.

Elsewhere, feminist concerns are subordinated to Na’amat’s nationalist objectives. On the page “Our mission,” Na’amat Canada outlines its basic beliefs in an eight-point pledge. Four points are broadly related to “social justice” statements such as, “Foster mutual respect in a diverse society,” and “Empower the individual through advocacy and education.” The other four points deal with Jewish identity and nationalism, such as, “Support the State of Israel as a secure, democratic and pluralistic society and homeland for the Jewish people.” The pledge concludes with the italicized statement, “*The first to embrace feminist ideals, members of Na’amat will continue to be innovative leaders in meeting the needs of an ever-changing world.*” Only one of the points specifically mentions women: “Enhance and safeguard the status of women, children and families in Israel and in Canada.” In this representation of Na’amat’s mission, the idea of “Zionist social responsibility” is emphasized, rather than its commitment to women. Nationalist symbols also permeate the design of each website. Na’amat USA uses a blue and white color scheme echoing the colors of the Israeli flag, and Na’amat Canada primarily uses orange, a color which expresses solidarity with the settler movement in the Gaza Strip. Orange is also used extensively in the website for Na’amat Israel (<http://www.naamat.org.il>), which is written exclusively in Hebrew.

Nationalist goals can also be seen in Na’amat’s descriptions of some of its activities in Israel. As described by Na’amat USA, Na’amat Israel runs a number of alternative high schools

for “students who have been unable to succeed in traditional schools, often because of family or behavioral problems.” Because of these alternative schools, “most students go on to become productive members of society.” The association of “productivity” with the maintenance of the state is a common theme of nationalist discourse, but the association of these schools with nationalist/state goals is seen more explicitly in a comment by the president of Na’amat USA on the page “Message from the New President,” who describes how impressed she was when she saw the schools: “There matriculation record is very high, and 95 to 100 percent go into the army!” The universal draft in Israel is certainly the main factor in this high military participation rate, but Na’amat USA’s president emphasizes the school’s role in the production of new human resources for the maintenance and possible expansion of the state’s security and occupation forces. Na’amat Canada describes this education system under the headline “Help troubled teenagers reshape their lives”—but how altruistic can this goal be if teenagers’ lives are being reshaped to fit them into a military role which will expose them to, and perhaps lead them to participate in violence and oppression?

Na’amat, though a self-proclaimed “feminist” organization, ultimately seems to be more concerned, at least in the self-representations presented on its Canadian and US websites, with Israeli nationalism than with feminism. In her article mentioned above, Inderpal Grewal writes, “one cannot view the practices of ‘grass-roots’ groups... in a celebratory way that ignores the complexity of their positioning as well as the problematic power relations inscribed in their efforts.” This brief analysis of Na’amat’s self-representations has attempted to shed some light on the complexity of the power relations of a women’s organization which is also closely associated with a nationalist ideology.

Works Cited

Grewal, Inderpal. "On the New Global Feminism and the Family of Nations: Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Practice." *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*. Ed. by Ella Shohat. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art. 1998.

Lourde, Audre. "An Open Letter to Mary Daly." *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Ed. by Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua. New York: Kitchen Table. 1983.

Na'amat Canada. Viewed June 7, 2005. <<http://naamat.com/>>

Na'amat Israel. Viewed June 7, 2005. <<http://naamat.org.il/>>

Na'amat USA. Viewed June 7, 2005. <<http://naamat.org/>>