

The ordeal of Women in Gaza: When Universal Principles falter.**محنة المرأة في غزة: عندما تتعثر المبادئ العالمية****ATTOU Khadidja ^{*1}**¹ University Mohamed Ben Ahmed Oran 2, attou.khadidja@univ-oran2.dz

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Abstract:

In a world where women's rights have become a central focus of global discussions, it is notable that some instances of grave violations prompt significant mobilization, while others are largely neglected. An analysis of the violations faced by Palestinian women living under occupation clearly highlights a stark double standard in both social and political discourse. This article highlights the double standard in the treatment of international conflicts, specifically emphasizing the situation of Palestinian women in Gaza after October 7, and the Israeli attacks that have destroyed the city's infrastructure and caused the deaths of thousands.

Keywords: Double standard; Women's rights; Violence; International conflicts; Women under occupation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A central issue in international debates, women's rights are the subject of intense international mobilization when they are violated in countries with little or no respect for gender equality. However, it is striking to note that certain situations of serious violations remain largely ignored. By examining the complex issues surrounding the fate of Palestinian women, it becomes clear that a manifest double standard permeates both societal and political discourse. Often left out of conversations about conflict and resistance, these women face unique challenges that are overshadowed by broader narratives of national struggle.

This phenomenon, known as the double standard, is most evident in the differential treatment of women's rights in different geopolitical contexts. The double standard is understood as a differentiated judgement made about the same behavior or act when it is carried out by people from two different groups, in the context of a hierarchical society, ... (De Senarclens, 2017).

The double standard can manifest itself in different ways and it is particularly complex to define, especially in legal terms, the responsibility of states that adopt it: as some examples show, it generally involves silence in the face of violations of international law or human rights (Benchikh, 2023).

The situation of women in Gaza, in particular, illustrates this unequal treatment. In addition to the direct violence linked to military operations, Gazan women suffer multiple forms of gender-based violence, ranging from the aggravation of violence, arrests and sexual assaults during the conflict to the lasting psychological impact of repeated bombardments on

their daily lives and Israel's genocidal famine policy. Yet this reality is often obscured in international discourse on women's rights.

October 7, 2023, revealed to the whole world that the Gaza Strip had been living for decades under a state of siege, forgotten by international organizations and by the so-called democratic Nations defending human rights.

Issues:

This observation prompts two fundamental questions: what are the causes of this disparity? Why do the rights of Palestinian women not receive the same level of international attention as those in other areas? Based on initial documentary research on the topic and backed by critical feminist literature, we can propose the following **hypotheses**:

1. Colonialist and racist ideologies create a double standard in international conflicts. A comparison between the Ukraine conflict and the Gaza conflict reveals unequal treatment.
2. Feminism is not universal but is part of the colonial ideologies of Western dominance; it is a form of ethnocentric thinking that requires deconstruction.

The objectives of the article are to:

- Exhibit the inconsistencies in international relations by examining the situation of Palestinian women,
- Analyze certain notions that have developed within a Western framework and are incompatible with diverse cultural contexts,
- Challenge the universality of specific norms concerning women's rights,
- Highlight the limitations of Western feminism in its standards for outrage,
- Evaluate the actions of the UN concerning women's rights under Israeli occupation.

Our work intends to examine the inconsistency in the standards applied to conflict resolution, using the case of Palestinian women, who are frequently overlooked in global discussions, as an example. Firstly, we will present the international principles regarding

women's rights and their varied implementation. Then, we will explore how this inconsistency is mirrored in global movements and policies. Lastly, we will investigate the factors contributing to this disparity in addressing the rights of Palestinian women and conclude by assessing the implications for the credibility of universal human rights principles.

2. Varied interpretation of global principles on women's rights.

The double standard, the application of different standards to different groups, is particularly obvious in conflict situations. The Gaza's women serve as a remarkable example. Although they endure very challenging living circumstances, their struggles are frequently overlooked by Western countries and media, falling victim to a biased perspective that downplays their situation.

In the context of a conflict, the double standard appears through the implementation of varying rules and expectations based on gender, ethnicity, religion, or political alignment of the individuals involved. This difference is observed at multiple levels. (Achcar, 2023). However, there are universal principles emanating from the United Nations, shared by the international community and very often applied in several countries.

2.1 Universal principles of women's rights:

Even though global laws ensure protection for everyone, women frequently suffer from particular types of violence (such as sexual violence and forced marriages) that are not always properly addressed. The specific needs of women (reproductive health, access to hygiene, etc.) are sometimes neglected in humanitarian interventions. Universal principles regarding women's rights are recognized and supported in various ratified international resolutions and conventions, including some that Israel has signed (UN), but these principles

are not upheld in practice. We will present them and determine if they are followed, broken, and not enforced.

➤ **Convention to End All Types of Discrimination Against Women: the CEDAW**

This treaty, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, is widely viewed as a global mandate for women's rights. It obligates the member states to implement measures aimed at eradicating discrimination against women across various spheres (including political, social, economic, and cultural domains). Israel has ratified CEDAW, but there is inadequate action to address the infringements of Palestinian women's rights. This situation exemplifies a typical case of disparity in standards (UN Women).

➤ **United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325**

Established in 2000, this resolution acknowledges the significant role of women in preventing and resolving conflicts and emphasizes the need for their protection during wartime. It emphasizes the significance of ensuring women's rights and stopping sexual violence during conflicts (UN). The situation of Palestinian women, who live amidst enduring conflict and continuous hostilities, is directly addressed by this resolution. Nonetheless, only a small number of tangible measures have been enacted to safeguard them.

➤ **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)**

This statement affirms the equal dignity and rights of everyone, regardless of sex, race, or religion. Although it does not focus specifically on women, it is an essential foundation for all human rights conventions, including women's rights (UN).

➤ **International Agreements on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)**

These two agreements supplement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and confirm the equal rights of men and women in all civil, political, economic, and social aspects (Humanium). As a signatory, Israel is legally bound to respect these principles in the territories it administers. However, the violations of Palestinian women's rights contradict these commitments.

➤ **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - Goal 5: Gender equality**

Adopted in 2015 as part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals encompass gender equality as one of the 17 objectives to be accomplished. Goal 5 aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls and ensure their full and effective participation in all spheres (UN). The situation of Palestinian women remains a blind spot in reports on progress towards this goal.

2.2.1. The UN and UN Women's inadequate contribution to Palestinian women's defence

Although the United Nations has the tools it needs to maintain order and security and defend human rights, it remains powerless in the face of divisions between member states, particularly regarding the enforcement of resolutions that establish sanctions against Israel. It is often blocked in the Security Council by the right of veto overused by the United States. This considerably limits its action.

➤ **The UN: a strong legal framework, but limited action**

The UN has established a robust legal framework for the defense of human rights and women's rights, notably through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW,

and resolutions on women, peace and security, such as UN resolution 1325. Despite these tools, the UN is struggling to take concrete action to protect Palestinian women, who are victims of the dual oppression of military occupation and gender inequality, the main aspects of which are discussed below:

Although resolution 1325 commits Member States to protecting women in conflict and promoting their participation in peace processes, very few concrete initiatives have been taken for Palestinian women (UN). UN reports on the application of resolution 1325 rarely mention the situation of Palestinian women specifically. Calls for an investigation into sexual and gender-based violence in the territories occupied by Israel often go unheeded.

The UN's ability to intervene in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is limited by blockages within the Security Council, where permanent members such as the United States regularly veto any resolution deemed too critical of Israel (Fernandez, 2023). This results in a form of organizational inaction, even though there are obvious human rights violations that the organization aims to protect and uphold.

➤ **UN Women: insufficient support for Palestinian women**

UN Women, the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women, plays a key role in defending women's rights throughout the world (UN Women). Nonetheless, its presence in the Palestinian territories remains limited and frequently symbolic. UN Women and other feminist NGOs adopt a cautious or even passive stance on Gaza, for fear of clashing with influential powers.

As a result, there is a gap between the stated values (solidarity, universality, defense of all women) and the actions actually taken. Of course, it issues warnings about the dramatic situation of Palestinian women in Gaza, but takes little or no action because of the difficult, sometimes impossible, access to the Gaza Strip (UN).

While UN Women provides funding and support to certain community projects designed to enhance the living conditions of Palestinian women, the overall effectiveness of these efforts is restricted due to insufficient political and diplomatic pressure on the entities accountable for the violations. For instance, the initiatives of UN Women in Palestine primarily concentrate on enhancing women's economic empowerment, but they do not adequately tackle the ongoing violence they experience as a consequence of the conflict.

UN Women has not initiated a major global campaign to address the living conditions of Palestinian women, unlike their efforts in other regions such as Afghanistan. Although Palestinian NGOs regularly denounce violations of women's rights, their collaboration with UN Women remains inadequate. This absence of collaboration restricts the range of activities in practice.

The international community deprives Palestinian women of their rights and remains silent about the Israeli violations of which they are victims, Statement by Ashraf al-Qudra, spokesman for the Ministry of Health in Gaza, on the eve of International Women's Rights Day on March 8, 2025 (Chronicle of Palestine).

2.2.2. Consequences of UN inaction:

The organisation's strength lies mainly in the ability of its influential members to reach agreements. Otherwise, it simply mirrors their disagreements and the specific advantages provided within the Security Council. The fact of being a permanent member and having a veto then becomes an ability to hinder action when these powers are divided. The United States, in general, is firmly opposed to any measure deemed too restrictive for its regional ally and wishes to maintain Israel's right to defend itself. In this context, it would be unwise to expect the UN to intervene resolutely and decisively on the ground (Fernandez,

2023). It is clear that the UN's inaction or very limited action has repercussions on the treatment of the situation of Palestinian women:

➤ **Perpetuation of the suffering of Palestinian women:**

In the absence of strong international support, Palestinian women continue to suffer the consequences of the occupation, with no real prospect of any improvement in their rights. Since October 7, 2023, particularly in Gaza, where 70% of those killed by Israeli assaults are women and children (OHCHR), there has been no protection against the Israeli genocide of Gazan civilians.

➤ **Weakening of the credibility of international institutions:**

The inability of the UN and UN Women to act coherently and fairly undermines their legitimacy as defenders of human rights and women's rights. The peoples of the global South have less and less faith in international institutions and, most dramatically, in international law, given the lack of concrete action and real sanctions. This is an evident instance of inconsistency.

➤ **Exclusion of Palestinian women from peace processes:**

One of the central recommendations of Resolution 1325 is to ensure the participation of women in peace negotiations. However, Palestinian women are largely absent from international discussions, which contributes to their marginalisation in the search for solutions to the conflict. Similarly, their defence as a target group in armed conflicts remains absent. It is worrying to note the strict repression of civic space, specifically targeting those working in the fields of human rights and humanitarian issues, through threats, intimidation and other actions. (OHCHR).

3. Double standards in application

In several regions of the world, violations of women's rights have prompted a rapid and massive mobilisation of the international community, with extensive media coverage and concrete diplomatic pressure.

While countries such as Ukraine, Afghanistan and Iran regularly arouse international indignation and solidarity, the violations suffered by Palestinian women, who live under occupation and face systemic violence, struggle to find a similar response.

3.1. Intense mobilisation for women's rights in certain countries versus the low profile of Palestinian women's rights

Since the return to power of the Taliban in 2021, the restrictions imposed on Afghan women have provoked a unanimous international reaction. The major powers, international institutions and NGOs have denounced the situation, calling for firm measures to protect women's rights. As a result, resolutions were adopted and implemented: suspension of international aid, repeated diplomatic condemnations, and increased support for local women's rights organisations (Amnesty International).

The arrest and murder of the young Mahsa Amini by the morality police in Tehran on September 16, 2022, on the grounds that she was wearing a headscarf that did not comply with the law, sparked massive indignation and an unprecedented revolt (Amnesty International). This spontaneous uprising, supported by the slogan Women, Life, Freedom at national level, quickly gained international momentum, provoking many favourable reactions that underlined the need to free these women. Social networks amplified the movement, and many Western capitals expressed their support by organising demonstrations and imposing targeted sanctions against Iranian officials (Lomba Léa, 2024).

Iranian women's rights have thus become a central issue in diplomatic relations between Iran and the Western powers.

UN Women operates in Ukraine, delivering humanitarian aid to over 45,000 women and girls and indirectly supporting 100,000 others in 2023. They offer critical aid, psychological support, legal assistance, and connect people with social services. In 2023, UN Women disbursed US\$10.6 million in support of women and women-led civil society organisations at the national level. Women's associations in Ukraine and neighbouring countries are for the most part at the forefront of the humanitarian response (UN Women).

Not to mention the Western media, which have never stopped reporting, denouncing and expressing indignation about the situation of Ukrainian women. As a result, sanctions against Russia have been stepped up and implemented, diplomatic condemnations have been repeated, media coverage has been almost permanent, and substantial international aid has been given to internal and external organisations working in solidarity with Ukrainian women.

Unlike in Afghanistan, Iran or Ukraine, there is no significant pressure from the major powers to improve the situation of Palestinian women in Gaza. Worse still, the United States is able to manipulate international law to suit its own ends, turning it into a flexible tool with which to denounce aggression when it comes from Russia, which it considers to be an enemy country, while supporting the occupation and disproportionate, indiscriminate strikes when it comes from its Israeli protégé (Benchikh, 2023).

3.1.2. Media focus and narrative: little coverage of Palestinian women's rights

Massive media coverage in real time, with strong empathy for Ukrainian victims, especially women and children. On the other hand, the situation of Palestinian women,

although marked by serious and persistent violations, receives little support from the international community and the media. There are few articles on their behalf.

As soon as the Israeli offensive in Gaza began, a disturbing image emerged in the Western media, portraying Israel as the symbol of civilisation against the primitive bastion that is the Middle East. Some authorities have even reduced the Palestinian population to the status of animals. These stereotypes are not new and are reinforced by media whose propaganda has a nasty habit of misrepresenting the Arab community (Aldossari, 2024).

If we compare the media coverage of the conflict in Ukraine with that of the aggression on Gaza, we inevitably find a difference in the way the two conflicts are treated. During the conflict in Ukraine, media coverage often highlighted the stories of Ukrainian women who were both victims of war and resisters, and their role in reconstruction.

There was strong condemnation of the sexual violence committed by Russian forces, as well as the use of emotional language and personal accounts to humanise the Ukrainian victims. As for the women of Gaza, although their suffering is documented, media coverage sometimes tends to reduce them to passive victims without necessarily highlighting their resilience and their active role within the community.

Media coverage is more limited and often biased, focusing on the political and military conflict. Palestinian women's stories are often reduced to statistics or images of suffering. In this media coverage, less attention is paid to sexual and gender-based violence; there is less humanisation of the victims; there is a tendency to portray Palestinians as terrorists or human shields and to see Palestinian women as submissive.

3.1.3. Criticism of Western feminism

Criticism of Western feminism point out its selectivity and lack of inclusiveness when addressing the violence experienced by Palestinian women. It is a variable-geometry feminism with a Western-centric vision. Similarly, we can speak of an ethnocentric construction of categories that indiscriminately amalgamate diverse and sometimes antinomic realities.

Western feminist discourse on Third World women tends to produce stereotyped images of non-Western women, often portrayed as victims, while masking the complex realities of their lives under the guise of a supposed humanism (Mohanty, 2010).

➤ **Feminism with variable geometry**

On the one hand, there is strong mobilisation for women's rights in certain regions (e.g. Iran, Afghanistan, Ukraine), but a deafening silence or weak commitment to the situation of Palestinian women. We can see that the discourse, which claims to be universal, is often aligned with political and geopolitical considerations.

These are not the first mistakes made by Western feminists. This type of feminism, which constantly prioritises the issues valued by Western standards, often tends to overlook the problems of women of colour and women from formerly colonised or Arab countries. This troubling pattern can easily be seen in what is often described as imperial feminism (Rogers, 2023).

➤ **A Western-centric vision**

This approach highlights Western issues (right to abortion, equal pay) but does not take into account the realities of women living under occupation, at war or under attack.

However, it is disconcerting to note that distortions are adopted by feminists and activists (some media carry propaganda perpetuating a false image of the Arab community).

Some ardent defenders of Western feminism against gender violence seem to have taken up the cause of Israeli women, criticising the silence of the international community in the face of the rapes and sexual assaults suffered by Israeli women on October 7. The lack of empathy and the equivalent absence of indignation regarding the situation of Palestinian women and children reveal a scandalous injustice and a serious moral deficiency (Aldossari, 2024).

According to Mohanty, numerous scholarly studies suggest that Western feminist women are often implicitly portrayed as being universally liberated, enjoying equality, having control over their own bodies and sexuality, and being intelligent and superior and educated compared to the group categorised as Third World Women' (Mohanty, 2010).

It would seem that anger and the feminist movement are selectively directed at issues that fit into a narrative of overt Western liberation, leaving other issues, such as those relating to Palestine, in the shadows (Rogers, 2023).

A Western feminism whose claim to universality is more contested than ever. Given the variety and heterogeneity of feminist demands, it is now obsolete. It is now necessary to consider the common from another angle, not as a hegemonic and standardised universal (Mestiri, 2019).

A decolonial feminism is also trying to emerge, but is less visible because of the almost universal divergence surrounding decolonial thought, or decolonised thought, (Mestiri, 2015), which is inevitably linked to a form of communitarianism, or even veiled Islamism. It is essential that the realities experienced by women are addressed at local level, as universality can fragment feminist struggles and hinder global solidarity (Fischer and Hotait, 2023).

In a context dominated by the West, feminism cannot ignore its role in international power dynamics.

3.2. Factors explaining this double standard

A number of different factors may explain the double standards to which Palestinian women are subjected. They are summarised in the following points:

➤ Geopolitical factors: the weight of strategic alliances

The double standards applied to Palestinian women's rights are largely the result of geopolitical power relations. Israel enjoys major diplomatic and military support from major powers such as the United States and certain European countries. These alliances influence the way in which the international community reacts to human rights violations in the occupied territories.

When similar violations occur in other, less geopolitically sensitive contexts, they often lead to firm condemnation or even sanctions. In the Palestinian case, however, strategic interests dominate humanitarian concerns.

This situation helps to minimise the attention paid to the rights of Palestinian women, despite the seriousness of the violations to which they are subjected.

➤ Ideological factors: divisions within feminist movements

The Palestinian question divides international feminist movements. While some movements denounce the violations of women's rights in the occupied territories, others avoid getting involved because of the political sensitivity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This situation has worsened, negatively affecting Palestinian women since October 7, 2023.

Feminist discourse is becoming increasingly fragmented. Some feminist currents favour a universal approach to women's rights, while others adopt a more cautious stance in the face of complex conflicts where political interests are very much present. This fragmentation has repercussions on mobilisation, weakening international pressure and making it difficult to take concerted action in support of Palestinian women.

➤ **Media factors: biased or inadequate coverage**

Media coverage of conflicts has a strong influence on the international perception of human rights. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often presented through a security prism, focusing on issues of terrorism and defence, thereby obscuring social issues and women's rights.

There is a narrative bias; the international media tend to give disproportionate attention to certain aspects of the conflict, while neglecting the situation of civilian populations, particularly women.

The lack of visibility also puts Palestinian women at a serious disadvantage. Compared with other regions where women's rights are highlighted (such as Afghanistan under the Taliban), the suffering of Palestinian women remains under-reported. This low media profile helps to maintain the status quo and justify the inaction of international players.

➤ **Economic factors: commercial and military interests**

The arms trade and economic interests linked to the region also play an important role in maintaining the double standards. Several countries have close economic ties with Israel, particularly in the technology and defence sectors, which limits their willingness to

exert pressure on the human rights situation. Israel is a major player in the global arms and surveillance technology trade, which strengthens its strategic position. It is also protected by the US, which gives it a very large budget and high-tech weapons (SIPRI).

These economic relations dissuade many powers from taking firm action against violations of women's rights in the Palestinian territories.

4. CONCLUSION

Analysis of the situation of Palestinian women in Gaza highlights a clear double standard in the treatment of human rights. Several factors explain this inequality: geopolitical stakes, the strategic interests of the major powers, the influence of the media, and the dynamism of international organisations which sometimes adopt a selective approach to the defence of women's rights. These biases compromise the universality of the principles that are supposed to guarantee the protection of civilian populations, particularly in times of war.

Similarly, this differential treatment by the media and international organisations is indicative of a racist and colonialist outlook. This appalling silence highlights the moral failure of the Western world, which repeatedly fails to give Palestinian women the same empathy as others, thereby dehumanising them. By not paying the same attention to the violations suffered by Palestinian women, the international community is weakening the principle of the universality of human rights. Similarly, the double standards undermine the credibility of the institutions and organisations that position themselves as defenders of women's rights. This differential treatment worsens the situation of Palestinian women, who do not receive the support they need to improve their living conditions and assert their rights.

Faced with this reality, it is imperative to question the logic of invisibility and to demand a coherent and equitable mobilisation in favour of women's rights, whatever their

geopolitical situation. Only an uncompromising acknowledgement of injustices will prevent certain forms of suffering from being relegated to the background as a function of external interests.

Evoking the international community's double standards regarding Palestinian women is part of the denunciation of the way the world governs and the basis on which international relations are currently founded. It is also an epistemological challenge for social science research, to reflect on the criteria for indignation and sanctions that the West imposes on the global South.