



## The Psychology of Resilience among Palestinian Female Students

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### Abstract

In this paper I present initial findings from a qualitative exploratory study with a small sample of academically resilient Palestinian female students in the West Bank. Participants reported a number of factors that from their personal experiences explain the remarkable academic achievement among Palestinian female students including: Family support, female segregated schools, supportive female teachers, educational success as a path to the public space, and resilient personal characteristic.

### Theoretical Framework

There is a plethora of educational literature documenting the ways by which formal educational systems in diverse societies are structured and conducted in manners which hinder the opportunities for academic success and achievement among ethnic minority students, students from the working class and female students (Banks, 1994; McLaren, 1994). This corpus of scholarship in the fielded widely known as “multicultural education” focuses mainly on educational theory and practice within the context of heterogeneous western societies (i.e., USA, Canada, and Australia). Earlier paradigm of explaining the low achievement records among minority students was labeled as “the cultural deficit paradigm” which had emphasized a wide range of factors within the cultural background of the students that place them in a category labeled as “at risk students” (Pollard, 1989).

Nonetheless, there are many examples of “at risk students” who are considered “success stories” despite the odds working against them. An alternative paradigm of understanding the educational successful experiences of minority students despite the obstacles in their educational environment is known as the paradigm of “student resilience” (Jarret, 1997; Pollard, 1989; Floyd, 1996). According to scholars working from this worldview “rather than focusing on the children who were casualties of these negative factors, the studies focused instead on those who had not succumbed” (Howard, Dryden & Johnson, 1999,

p. 309). What kind of factors in the student’s immediate environment and what personality characters are credited for such accomplishments?

Furthermore, feminist scholars took an issue with the educational system’s discrimination against female students resulting in a pattern of low achievement among females comparable to their male counterparts (Sadker, Sadker, & Long, 1993). Pioneering critical research and theorizing on women’s psychology was inspired by the realization that traditional theories of psychology were, to a large extent, developed by white male scholars and used white male research participants in their earlier stages of theory constructions (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Belenky, 376 Building participative, empowering & diverse communities Clinchy, Golberger, & Taule, 1997). Conventional theories of psychology did not account for women’s psychological experiences and development, and considered male experiences as the norm against which women’s psychological development was examined and evaluated.

Working initially with Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, Carol Gilligan realized that these critical developments in women’s psychology provided solid theoretical foundations for many scholars of multicultural education who were mostly interested in female students’ education and the ways by which educational systems discriminate against them and obstruct their educational achievements and opportunities for success (Sadker & Sadker, 1982). However, consistently with the general movement of

multicultural education in diverse western societies, the focus of this body of research remains on environmental factors within the classroom, the school, and the students' cultural background which limit female students' equal opportunities for academic success, rather than exploring factors that may lead to resilience and "success stories".

Research addressing the area of children resilience is broadly conceived as "paradigm shift" (Kuhn, 1970) in our understanding of minority and female students academic success despite the factors of risk for failure abundant in their educational and social environment (i.e., poverty, racial discrimination, sexism). Resilience is defined as a "set of qualities, or protective mechanisms that give rise to successful adaptation despite the presence of high risk factors during a course of development (Howard et.al, 1999, p. 310). In a qualitative study with a group of highly successful African American students, Floyd (1996), found two sets of factors that explain these students' resilience. External factors included support from family members and significant others such as teachers and counselors. Internal factors included personality traits such as perseverance, optimism and persistence. It is crucial to identify these positive factors and foster their development in order to increase minority and female students' opportunities for success.

Palestinian women under occupation experience multiple levels of oppression where patriarchy, sexism, colonialism and class exploitation are in continuous dialectical interaction with each other producing unbearable degree of adversity (Makkawi & Jaramillo, 2006). Consequently, Palestinian female students are exposed to a series of "risk factors" embedded in their educational environment throughout all levels of their education. In addition to conventional concerns of teenager females typically discussed in the psychological and educational literature, Palestinian female adolescents face a complicated set of societal restriction, demands and pressures as they enter high school. The phenomenon of academic success among Palestinian female students, despite the mounting difficulties and obstacles, indicates a trend of students' resilience in the face of acute adversity. It is intriguing to explore which factors account for the phenomenon of Palestinian female students' academic achievement when most factors in their environment are hindering rather than encouraging educational achievement.

### **The Current Study**

The annual public announcement of the results of the Tawjihi exams taken by Palestinian students upon their graduation from high school in the West Bank and Gaza may seem as a conventional cultural practice for the ordinary observer. However, a remarkable piece of data regarding female students' academic achievements intrigues a great deal of intellectual curiosity in the mind of the interested researcher. Out of the first forty distinguished Palestinian students who graduated in 2004/05 school year, divided between four categories (Arts and Sciences in the West Bank and in Gaza) an overwhelming majority (37 students) were females.

Furthermore, an examination of previous years of the Tawjihi results reveals a common trend of Palestinian female students' distinguished achievement, something which is most likely to be the case in the near future. This phenomenon, when juxtaposed against the widely documented environmental "risk factors" in the Palestinian educational system as well as in the Arab-Palestinian society as a whole, distinct this group of highly achiever Palestinian female students as a group that requires deeper studies of their experience.

The purpose of the current study was to explore in depth the "real world" of a cohort of female student high achievers. It focuses on their perceptions and evaluations of both external factors in their environment and internal personality factor that, from their views, led to their resilience and noteworthy success against the odds.

This study used "grounded theory" techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a qualitative methodology in order to explore in depth the experiences, strategies, identities, learning styles, psychological resilience, goals, aspirations, and coping methods among a purposefully selected sample of highly successful Palestinian female students. The sample of 15 participants in this inquiry consists of "data rich cases" (Patton, 2002) purposefully selected from the graduating cohort of Palestinian female high school students during the academic year 2005/06. The main tool for data collection was in-depth open ended interviews lasting approximately from one to one and a half hour for each session. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis. The transcripts were analyzed for emerging themes using "grounded theory" techniques.

### **Initial Findings**

Family Support and Protection: Participants indicated a strong, warm and accepting support from their

nuclear family during their high school experience. This “safety net” provided by family support and protection has some negative consequences such as limiting their chances for independence and the development of gender awareness. It is very important to them “not to disappoint their family”.

**Female Segregated Schools:** Unlike universities where there is full integration, most Palestinian high schools are segregated by gender. Female schools were perceived by participants as providing a “safe environment” away from cruel competition with male students over achievement and other school activities.

**Supportive Female Teachers:** The majority of the teachers in female schools are women. Female teachers view their teaching role as a great career achievement and take it very seriously comparable to their male counterparts in the Palestinian educational context. They are personally devoted to the role, and consequently serve as apposite role model to their female students. Male teachers on the other hand, take up teaching positions reluctantly due to the limitations of other job opportunities.

**Educational Success and the Public Space:** As expressed by participants, Palestinian women increase their chances to participate in the “public space” when they are highly successful in their academic work. The alternative is to marry earlier and remain within the family doing mostly domestic work. This perception of educational success as a chance to be involved in the “public space” serves as a challenge to be taken many Palestinian female students. Male students on the other hand, don’t have to be academically successful in order for them to be involved in the “public space”.

**Personal Characteristic:** Participants expressed remarkable degrees of self-confidence, internal sense of locus of control, self-esteem and persistence and motivation in their academic work.

### Conclusion

Resilience studies in education and mental health help identify context specific environmental and personal factors that together facilitate individual’s success and healthy development despite the odds. In education, and particularly education of the oppressed such as the case of Palestinian women, policy makers must shift their focus from “fixing the individual” to “fixing the system” where factors of resilience such as the family, peers and teachers, and school environment are utilized to support “at risk” female students who are victims of sexism, oppression, and discrimination. Palestinian women

have been historically involved as equal participants in the struggle for self determination providing solid bases for their claims of equality. The remarkable success stories of Palestinian female students discussed in this paper add another substantiated evidence for these claims and quest for equality and liberation.

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