

YOUNG NARRATIVES ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN HEBRON

AN INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL LIFE OF
WOMEN'S RIGHTS AMONG YOUNG PALESTINIANS IN HEBRON

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Lani Torfs

Student number: 01508205

Supervisor: Dr. Marlene Schäfers

Co-Supervisor: Dr. Omar Jabary Salamanca

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Abstract

The thesis aims to explore Hebron's exceptional and complex character to try and understand the positionality of young Palestinians within the city. I will focus on their process of socialisation to try and understand how these young Palestinians talk about and engage with women's rights. As Abu-Lughod (2010) states, introducing her concept 'the Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights', women's rights can only be understood through their social play. I will focus on the different ways, the different narratives, these young Palestinians used to talk about women's rights to try and understand what Abu-Lughod describes as social play. These three narratives aim to show the exceptionality of Hebron, the entanglement with a Western perspective and the complexity of a settler colonial reality.

The interpretative analysis showed three different narratives, young narratives. The first one emphasises the reproduction of a Western perspective that centralises women's bodies and women's dress in discussions about women's rights and development. Within the second narrative the educational discourse was used to measure improvements in women's rights and -positionality in Hebron. The third, and last narrative, describes the immense social pressure entangled in Hebron's society. The act of judging has focused intensively on women, pressuring their women's rights and the way women's rights are believed to be assured. Eventually, the exceptionality of Hebron runs through these three narratives. Hebron's economic capacity that focuses on money and trade, Hebron's strong social solidarity that comes with the downside of social pressure and the growing division between Area H1 and Area H2.

Samenvatting

Deze masterproef wil dieper ingaan op het uitzonderlijke en complexe karakter van Hebron om de positionaliteit van jonge Palestijnen in de stad te proberen te begrijpen. De focus ligt op hun socialisatieproces om te proberen te begrijpen hoe jonge Palestijnen omgaan met vrouwenrechten. Abu-Lughod (2010) tracht met haar concept, "*The Social Life Of Muslim Women's Rights*", precies te schetsen hoe vrouwenrechten begrepen en beleefd worden in een specifieke samenleving. Daarom ligt de focus op de verschillende narratieve die gebruikt werden door jonge Palestijnen wanneer vrouwenrechten besproken worden. Zo zou een beeld geschetst worden van wat Abu-Lughod omschrijft als "...*the social play of women's rights.*" (Abu-Lughod, 2010). De drie narratieve willen de uitzonderlijkheid van Hebron duiden, alsook de verstrengeling met een Westers perspectief en de complexiteit van een setter koloniale realiteit.

Na een interpretatieve analyse werden drie verschillellende narratieve gevonden. Het eerste narratief benadrukt de reproductie van een Westers perspectief dat vrouwenlichamen en vrouwenkledij centraliseert in discussies over vrouwenrechten en de ontwikkeling ervan. In het tweede narratief werd het educatieve discours als maatstaaf gecentraliseerd om vrouwenrechten en de positie van vrouwen in Hebron in beeld te brengen. Het derde en laatste narratief beschrijft de immense sociale druk die verstrikt is hun samenleving. De sociale druk heeft zich intensief op vrouwen gericht, waardoor vrouwenrechten en de manier waarop vrouwenrechten gegarandeerd worden onder druk wordt gezet. Uiteindelijk loopt het uitzonderlijk karakter van Hebron doorheen de drie narratieve. De economische capaciteit van Hebron die zich richt op geld en handel, de sterke sociale solidariteit van Hebron die gepaard gaat met de keerzijde van sociale druk en de groeiende scheiding tussen Area H1 en Area H2.

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I'm very grateful. I had the opportunity to meet so many different people, not only in Hebron but in Ramallah as well. It was easy to make friends and extremely valuable. The feeling of comfort enabled me to really focus on my research without worrying about everything that could possibly go wrong when conducting a research on your first individual research. Small trips, long conversations and short discussions learned me a lot about how young Palestinians are living their lives inside such a complex reality. Leaving Palestine really felt like leaving some good friends behind. I do want to thank my friends and family in Belgium as well. For all the support before, during and after my field research until I finished the last words of my thesis. A special thanks to Clara, Fien and Maxim for putting time and effort into reading and evaluating my thesis with such a commitment. Furthermore, I would like to thank Dr. Omar Jabary Salamanca for the guidance during the preparation of my field research and my promotor, Dr. Marlène Schäfers, for the support during the whole process of writing the thesis. Your feedback and recommendations were beyond valuable. At last, I want to thank the Leonard Woltjer Foundation for helping me achieve my research project by believing in it and granting me support from the very beginning.

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1. Introduction

Hebron is the city where Abraham, who's known as Ibrahim in Islam, buried his wife Sarah. Ibrahim is recognised as an important link in the chain of Prophets that ends with the Prophet Muhammed. Among Palestinians Hebron is considered to be one of the most conservative cities in the West Bank (Platt, 2012; Serry, 2017). As one of the holiest cities for Muslims, Palestinians living in Hebron are believed to be among the most religious. As a non-religious young white woman I was very conscious about the possible confrontation with a conservative society, so I persuaded myself to buy a scarf before leaving for Hebron. It seemed very easy to associate the conservative character of the city with women veiling themselves and the community expecting me to do the same. I realised I had internalised a gendered orientalist perspective in which a homogenous picture of Muslim women was easily centralised. A picture that erased all possible differences or particularities of Muslim cultures and the position of women within these cultures. As if a conservative Muslim woman would always be veiled.

Gendered orientalism refers to the particular way in which the West, referred to as the Occidental, has created an image of the feminine Orient (Saïd, 1979; Okin, 1999). The image is based upon the perceived superiority of the Occidental culture in relation to the Orient, associated with Muslim cultures and societies. Stemming from these images are politics, policies and practices that subordinate the relevance of local history, society and culture of the Orient. The image of the feminine Orient is a simple one. The feminine Orient is a Muslim woman who is pressured by her conservative patriarchal society to cover herself. A society filled with barbaric Muslim men from whom she needs saving. As Spivak famously put it "*white men saving brown women from brown men.*" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, 33). The veiled woman became an exceptional visible symbol of constructed inferiority of the Orient. The Occidental societies reproduce their superiority and appointed themselves a leading role in the moral crusade for women's rights, freedom and equality in the Middle East. Through the gendered orientalist perspective Muslim women's rights took an extraordinary place in Occidental societies (Abu-Lughod, 2010, 2-3). Women's rights were centralised in politics, media and public personalities (Osanloo, 2009, 7-8). Each and every individual had formed itself an opinion on women's rights and what to do to ensure them (Abu-Lughod, 2010, 1). Over the years, thousands of human rights organisations have instrumentalised women's rights, professionalised advocacy for more equality while making money out of it.

The Oslo Accords, signed in 1993, put Palestine back at the top of the international agenda (Jad, 2003). International human rights organisations and non-governmental organisations flooded Palestinian society, competing to submit another project. These projects centralised the veil, domestic violence and honour killings as 'real issues that subordinated Muslim women' (Abu-Lughod, 2010, 17-18; Allen, 2013, 67-68). Isolated cases of culturally specific forms of violence against women were discussed as if they were all part of the same homogenous Muslim culture. Human rights organisations continued to address a whole range of issues regarding Palestinian women but never seemed to consider one of the main causes of women's issues: the settler colonial reality held up by Israel. But as Muslim the women's rights discourse continued to be more institutionalised, their real value got lost within a Palestinian society.

So what do Muslim women's rights entail today for Palestinians? Firstly, breaking down human rights in general, and women's rights more specific, seems necessary. Therefore I chose to use a

concept of Lila Abu-Lughod (2010) to try and understand the meaning of Muslim women's rights in Hebron among young Palestinians. She introduced 'the Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights' as a concept to emphasise how essential it is to understand how women's rights travel through different places, communities and societies.

When women's rights are addressed, they need to be addressed as a concept that has been developed within a certain historical era, a certain social, political and economic context. The social play of women's rights needs to be understood. Abu Lughod continues *"By this, however, I mean not just the social circulation of the concept, as Appadurai (1986) might have taught us, or the social contexts of its reproduction, transplantation, or vernacularization, as Merry (2006) has usefully shown us for women's human rights more generally, but its differential mediation through various social networks and technical instruments, as Latour (1999) and the ethnographers of science might recommend."* (Abu-Lughod, 2010, 2-3). Once women's rights are developed, they start to create assumptions, ideals, opportunities and debates. It translates itself into a specific social reality that affects a whole society and influences traditional gender roles. In order to understand this social reality, we need to understand where women's rights are discussed. We need to understand the Palestinian context and more specific the context in Hebron.

Hebron has always had an exceptional and conceptual character. Exceptional in the sense that Hebron has been developing in a fundamentally different way than other Palestinian cities. But conceptual as Hebron does reflect the complexity of a settler colonial reality better than any other Palestinian city (Griffiths, 2017). 'The Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights' in Hebron needs to be understood in relation to Hebron's conceptual character. The city reflects the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Analysing the particularities of Hebron might help us understand the broader context, as Saida told me during one of the last interviews: *"I always say if any foreigner wants to know the real situation in Palestine, they have to come to Hebron."*

This thesis is built upon empirical field research carried out in Hebron. I conducted nine in-depth interviews over the scope of two months, in January and February 2020. During these months I interviewed both female and male Palestinians between the age of 24 and 32. All interviewees can be categorised as young Palestinians. I chose, very consciously, to focus on young Palestinians as I wanted to emphasis youngsters as active participants in Hebron's society. The past twenty years different scholars addressed the particular positionality of young Palestinians in a settler colonial reality as Palestine (Mc-Evoy-Levy, 2001; Høiglit, Atallah & El-Dada, 2013; Maira, 2013; Habashi, 2017). My research is built upon their research to be able to centralise young Palestinians' thoughts in discussions about women's rights. All the interviews departed from a gender perspective. The gender perspective acknowledges how the meaning of women's rights can only be understood when we know what they imply for both women and men (Hodgson, 2011, 2-4).

Women's rights as such were never the focus of the interviews, initially. When I started to question the development of Hebron and the development of the situation for women in Hebron focus shifted, very easily, to women's rights, it always being a part of human rights. Through a range of questions I tried to understand the contemporary situation for women in Hebron, from a female and male perspective, looking at the differences. Questioning issues of marriage, hijab and religion. Issues related to women's rights in Hebron's society.

This research aims to understand “*the social networks and technical instruments*” of women’s rights in Hebron, the way Abu-Lughod explained it. Therefore a first part will focus on Hebron’s social network, found in the historical development of Hebron and the city’s social, political and economic context. I will discuss the history briefly, to continue with a focus on Hebron’s society to be able to understand in what kind of social, economic and political context the young Palestinians I interviewed are moving today. To be able to make sense of the positionality of these young Palestinians I will focus, when relevant, on their (political) socialisation. This is to acknowledge their agency and particularity as part of a society. To make sense of what Abu-Lughod describes as “*technical instruments*” I will centralise the human rights discourse and development of the human rights industry in Hebron. Women’s rights have taken a very particular place within the discourse since their institutionalisation. Eventually, in the second part I will demarcate three different narratives that erupted from the interviews. An interpretative analysis of the nine interviews showed three dominant narratives that influence the assumptions, ideals, opportunities and debates evolving around women’s rights in Hebron. It tell us more about the way young Palestinians are talking about and engaging with women’s rights today in the context of Hebron.

All the first names written in the research are pseudonyms hiding the real identity of my interviewees. As I promised full anonymity, I aim to follow up to that promise. By using pseudonyms my interviewees become people again. It emphasises the fact that they are all people and not just numbers in an academic research. I want to acknowledge their value and their contribution to my research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Field research

Last minute changes and questions marked the beginning of my field research and engagement with Youth Against Settlements (YAS). My research is built upon short-term field work carried out over the scope of two months, January and February 2020, in and around Hebron. I spent most my time volunteering with Youth Against Settlement (YAS), a small non-governmental organisation located on Tel Rumeida. Tel Rumeida is the oldest site of ancient Hebron (Kern, 2010, 247 ; Platt, 2012, 3-5).

In 1984 seven Israeli families established settlements on the hill of Tel Rumeida arriving with six caravans (Platt, 2012, 5-6). After fourteen years the Israeli government officially approved the settlements. Today, the settlement on Tel Rumeida contains several permanent buildings. Two were built right behind the house of Youth Against Settlements (YAS, 2017). The centre of YAS is located in a Palestinian building that was initially occupied by the Israeli military and settlers. Through non-violent action YAS reclaimed the building from its Palestinian owner and established its centre. Today, YAS is a relatively small organisation with no more than thirty volunteers. The main focus of YAS has been the empowerment and education of young Palestinians, mostly Palestinians living in Area H2, to establish resistance through non-violent protests and actions. Israel has security authority over the whole area, which includes twenty percent of the city, for more than two decades already, trying to protect the Israeli settlers living in the area. Over the years, YAS set up several local and international campaigns in support of Palestinians living in Area H2.

Throughout these campaigns YAS has been supported substantially and financially by international organisations.

I met Selma near the end of my research in Hebron. During the interview she told me a lot about YAS, Area H2 and Hebron. Selma was ten years old when her family moved into the area. She grew up in very stressful and aggressive environment. She told me about the constant fear every time someone left the house, about the burglaries at night when Israeli soldiers came to arrest one of her brothers and about the extremely violent attacks by Israeli settlers. It was Arslan, the coordinator of YAS, who approached Selma and her brothers. When she finally joined YAS, she involved herself in the campaigns and actions, which all helped her to empower herself and to get rid of the dragging fear “...*It made me stronger. It gave me more self-confidence. It was sometimes very hard, but yeah it really broke the fears that I had.*”

It wasn't until I met Selma that I acknowledged the value of an organisation as Youth Against Settlements (YAS). Before I encountered more difficulties understanding the reality behind YAS. When I arrived in Hebron, in the beginning of January, everything was cold, grey and rainy. The weather affected the atmosphere in and around the city. On a rainy day the city centre, Area H1, was almost completely empty. When it started snowing, nobody even opened their shop. Not much was happening at YAS either. The male volunteers met at the centre on a daily basis to sit around the campfire or play some cards. The female volunteers stayed at home mostly. Near the end of January, Arslan organised a three-piece series of workshops centralising gender questions. The workshops series were only attended by male members. Around fifteen young men gathered at the centre to talk about women's rights, equality and the meaning of masculinity. I tried to evaluate the workshop series with the male volunteers. As the workshops were in Arabic, I couldn't follow up on the content or interactions. I did observe two out of three workshops. Afterwards, Arslan explained to me the particular focus on male volunteers. He emphasised the necessity of these workshops to understand the different standards present in the world. “*As a Palestinian man you are judged differently than as a Western man.*” Which shows actually where a gendered orientalist perspective stems from. From the perceived superiority of the Occident to the Orient, the latter being judged fundamentally different than the first.

It took a while before I had to chance to actually talk to a female volunteer. I met Tala in the beginning of February, but only briefly. She was a young Palestinian woman who came up to the centre for the first time. We started talking about her very recent decision to join YAS. She wanted to be able to do something, but she needed to be able to do it from home. Her parents wouldn't allow her to come up to the centre on a daily basis. The area was still associated with violence of Israeli settlers and soldiers, lawlessness and threat. Particularly, because the centre is located right next to an Israeli settlement. These associations make it very hard for young Palestinian women to spend more time at the centre. When I eventually met Selma, during my last week, it became more clear to me what it meant to join YAS as a young woman. She seemed very open and honest about her personal engagement and personal gains. A lack of female volunteers made it easy to downgrade YAS as another organisation dominated by men. Talking to Tala and Selma turned these thoughts around.

It is not to make conclusive statements about Youth Against Settlements. It is to show my line of thoughts, my doubts and my interpretations. All are subjective. I decided to not make YAS the main

focus of my thesis, but to shift focus to the city of Hebron and the young Palestinian living inside of it. More precisely, on how these young Palestinians perceive one particular topic – women’s rights. Nevertheless, it does not dismiss the relevance of my engagement with YAS. The personal engagement and effort I put in volunteering shaped my fieldwork in different ways. I spend about two months walking around in Hebron, meeting new people, talking to people as part of the Humans of Hebron project. Not only did I conduct nine in depth interviews, I also conducted twenty-five additional interviews for that project. The Humans of Hebron-project was initiated by YAS and involved short interviews – ranging from fifteen to thirty minutes – with Palestinians living in Hebron. Questions ranged from personal history, commitments and dreams to daily life in Hebron. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to finalise a short Facebook-post. These interviews were never enlisted as part of my research, but were of great value for the first part of my thesis. Talking to different people, from all different backgrounds and ages, helped me to understand life in Hebron. Being able to practice interviews skills before actually conducting my own interviews was very valuable as well. It thought me a lot. It made me realise I could have never really been prepared for my first real fieldwork. I found much of the practice of doing fieldwork from the practical application of the methods when volunteering, so mostly when I was doing these interviews. These first experiences taught me how to be creative and mostly, it taught me to be flexible. Still, field research is all about subjectivity. I, as a young white non-religious pro-Palestinian woman, have certain interpretative frameworks that shape the way I think, talk and analyse the situation in Hebron. It is only one interpretative analysis that does not aim to conclude an objective reality. Rather, it aims to emphasis the relevance of interpretative analysis in a complex context as Hebron. It aims to show a small part of the complexity and exceptionality of this particular Palestinian city in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The focus on women’s rights emerged from the field. I chose to start collecting data before pinpointing my research question. Throughout the interviews I learned a lot about Hebron. Young Palestinians were talking about the character of Hebron and its people, about the immense impact of the division of the city, especially after the Second Intifada and about the positionality of women inside their society. As different topics passed through the interviews I was able to shift attention to women’s rights. When I started analysing the interviews, using an interpretative analysis, three different narratives emerged. The fact that women’s rights were never introduced as a topic, but did repeatedly emerge shows a certain reproduction of a women’s rights discourse in Hebron’s society. The centrality of the human rights discourse, I discuss later on, could explain this reproduction. My positionality as a young white female researcher could explain it as well. However, as an unexperienced researcher I found it valuable to collect the data from the field before starting to properly analyse is. My time in Hebron was limited as I chose to volunteer during my field research. It limited the possibility to follow one precise methodological framework. However, I built my research upon previous knowledge and personal commitment.

2.2. In-depth interviews

Before I started the interviews for my research, I had conducted about twenty, less formal, interviews already. During these interviews I was accompanied by Mohammed, who eventually became my research partner. Mohammed had been a volunteer with Youth Against Settlements (YAS) for a couple of years already. When I arrived in Hebron, he was leading the Humans of

Hebron-project. I was responsible for the interviews, the transcriptions and the final Facebook-post. He was responsible for contacts and translations. Some of the interviews were in English, others were in Arabic. As a young sports journalist, Mohammed managed interview skills and a social network that helped me build my personal network to conduct empirical research. Most of the interviews were planned at the end of January and the beginning of February 2020, when my contribution to the Humans of Hebron-project was almost finished. Mohammed joined in on seven of the nine interviews as translator from Arabic to English. These seven interviews were also arranged with the help of Mohammed. All interviewees were young Palestinian men and women who were currently living in Hebron, seven who were living in Area H1 and two who were living in Area H2. Some of the interviewees were more closely related to Mohammed than others. Some interviewees Mohammed managed to contact by calling on the social network achieved within the journalist sector. Others I contacted myself through previously established relations.

It is necessary to evaluate my empirical research as a shared project in which Mohammed, my research partner played a significant role. Before entering the field, I had no intention of looking for a research partner due to the limited duration of my research. My engagement in the Human of Hebron project, however, involved to intense cooperation with Mohammed, as we were interviewing together on a daily basis. I eventually did ask Mohammed to help me with my research. Conscious about the existing neo-colonial chain of academic research I aimed to involve Mohammed as much as possible (Cirhuza, 27th of April 2020). In the beginning the involvement of Mohammed was rather limited to mere translations during the interviews. As several interviews passed, Mohammed became more actively involved. We discussed the research sample, evaluated interviews and shared general opinions. In their article on fieldwork in urban Pakistan, Anwar & Viqar (2016) emphasize this role, reflexivity and positionality of a research partner and how it does add depth when you are trying to understand the field. Especially when the field is as complex as Hebron. Working with a research partner creates valuable opportunities and tensions for a researcher when producing knowledge. The extended social network of Mohammed, and his trusted position within it, assured credibility of myself as a white female researcher in Hebron. The fact that interviewees trusted Mohammed, made them more willing to talk to me. Mohammed shared interest and thoughts about Hebron, its people and its society. Throughout a range of formal and informal conversations he taught me a lot about the intensifying disjuncture between the people living in Area H1 and the people living in Area H2. Things I could refer to in the interviews.

The nine in depth interviews were semi-structured in-depth interviews. I used a topic list and some short questions during each interview to guide myself through the most important topics. These topics ranged from the social life in Hebron, to women's position within Hebron's society, to end with a positive thought on Hebron. Out of the nine interviews, all interviewees mentioned women's rights at least once when we were talking about women. Women's rights were used to describe and measure gender equality within Hebron's society.

The interviews were all in-depth interviews ranging between thirty minutes and one hour and a half. In-depth interviews seemed the best method considering the complex and sensitive context of Hebron. As stated by Robson & Foster (1989) the biggest value of the in-depth interview method is the fact that more personal topics can be discussed. Within a Palestinian context, politics have become very personal. I was told several times, during formal and informal conversations, how all families in Hebron know at least one relative that has been arrested, wounded or killed by the Israeli

military. And if it wasn't the Israeli military, it was an Israeli settler. The impact of the dragging settler colonial reality is sensible in each and every family. Political topics are sensitive. Different interviewees stopped talking when my questions were perceived to be too political.

When I interviewed Rachid, a young journalist, questions about political activism, engagement or thoughts were answered reluctantly. Only after Mohammed's assurances about confidentiality Rachid continued to answer my questions. But he was still holding back. Selma expressed the relationship between politics and her personal life as a tension she had been confronted with repeatedly. Selma was volunteering with YAS for about ten years already when I met her. She spent years volunteering and she loved it. Until I asked if volunteering was part of a political activism for her. Selma was more reluctant and answered. *"I didn't want to be politically active but this situation made me go with politics. I will not be really political, because I don't know that much about politics. But the situation pushed me into it."* She described volunteering and political activism as forced upon her, not by anyone in particular. Rather by the reality she grew up in. Today, her reality was about to change. Selma is engaged with a Palestinian man who lives in Jerusalem. He holds the Blue Card, which makes it possible for him to travel to the West Bank and to Israel. After the marriage Selma wants to be able to move to Jerusalem. Therefore, she needs a Blue Card as well. Ever since her engagement Selma stopped her involvement with YAS. She wants to be sure to receive the Blue Card and that neither the Israeli government, nor the Palestinian Authority can decline her request.

2.3. Research sample

I found it very valuable to be able to rely on a research partner. It strengthened my research as it broadened the scope of it. Mohammed helped to demarcate my research sample as I aimed to. His social network, together with the network of YAS, was exceptionally valuable. It assured me the luxury of finding people who fit into my aimed research sample. All interviewees can be described as young Palestinians or as Bourdieu (1993) states youth. However, *"...youth is only a word"* (Bourdieu, 1993, 143-154). There are a lot of different classifications of youth age range. I decided to follow the classification used in the research of the Birzeit University together with the Centre for Development Studies and the American Friends Service Committee that centralised the identity, space and community participation among young Palestinians. The research first demarcated young Palestinians as ranging between the ages of 18 and 29 years old, but re-evaluated the demarcation at the end of the survey (Al-Sakka, 2017, 15-17). The first demarcation did not enjoy unanimity (Hilal, 2017, 138). The age range was broadened to 34. So I eventually choose to use the reevaluated demarcation of young Palestinians as ranging between the ages of 18 and 34 years old.

I wanted to focus on young Palestinians who grew up in Hebron governate, in and around Hebron city. Palestinians who really knew the city. Only Ali, who I met through a mutual friend, moved to Hebron at a later age. His mother was from Hebron but he spent the first years of his childhood in Saudi Arabia. His family moved back to Hebron during the Second Intifada, beginning of 2000. Ali described his family as very connected to Palestine and to their Palestinian identity. His parents always made sure all the children knew where they came from. They spend more than three months in Hebron, every year. As he told me himself: *"We were always Palestinians."* Eventually, Ali described the post-Second Intifada period as most influential in his life. By including a focus on

childhood I wanted to be able to understand parts of their process of socialisation in a city as Hebron.

I interviewed six men and three women. The balance I was aiming for, in terms of gender, got lost because of the last cancelled interview. The interview was planned for the second last day of my field research so I was not able to plan another one in this short period of time. Of the nine interviews, two were with Palestinians living in Area H2. During the interviews focus easily shifted to the Israeli settlers, soldiers, their violence and the difficulties growing up in this area. Two out of nine is only a small part of the research sample. Still, these two interviews did provide a perspective in the overall research. On top of that, informally I was able to talk to different Palestinians who were living in Area H2 – in the Humans of Hebron-project but outside the project as well, as I spend most of my time in Area H2. The overall focus of the literature, projects and documentaries has always been on the people living in Area H2. It is the area where Palestinian families have been forced to live right next to Israeli settlements. The direct consequences of Israel's settler colonial project are never as hard as in this area. The intensity and exceptionality of the area made it seem easier to understand the particularities and complexities of the people living there. The life of the people living in Area H1 is rendered less exceptional. Therefore, I wanted to focus on the exceptional and conceptual character of Hebron. I want to be able to include Palestinians living in both areas, as they are both part Hebron's society.

2.4. Interpretative analysis

It was only when all the interviews were done and I started the transcriptions of all the recordings that I centralised my final research question: *“What narratives erupt when young Palestinians are talking about Women's Rights? How do these particular narratives tell us more about the Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights in Hebron's society?”* It took a while before I finalised my research question as it was constructed during the fieldwork itself. As several formal and informal conversations passed, I started to realise where to put my focus. This means women's rights were never really the focus of my interviews. However, talking about women's positionality in Hebron's society turned into talking about women's rights very quickly.

My findings and discussion are built upon qualitative research and interpretative analysis of the research data. Patton (1980; 1990; 2002; 2014) has written a whole range of books about qualitative research methodologies in which different characteristics of qualitative research are pinpointed. He differs three different characteristics. I want to discuss these characteristics briefly to emphasis the relevance of qualitative research and interpretative analysis. Firstly, qualitative research methodologies aim to include context. Context is essential when trying to understand people. Therefore I put focus on Hebron, the historical development of the city and the development of the human rights discourse inside of it. Secondly, qualitative methodologies depart from a perspective in which a society is believed to be socially constructed. During my research I tried, first and foremost, to understand the precise society I arrived in. Through understanding I aimed to explain parts of the thoughts, doubts and beliefs I encountered.

Finally, qualitative research methods are always rather inductive than deductive. Using an inductive way of analysing means theories are not tested but rather looked for afterwards. While collecting data focus is put on what emerges from the interviews you are conducting. What are young

Palestinians saying, how are they explaining women's rights and mostly do other young Palestinians explain it in the same way? Inductive research looks for an open focus but for repetition as well. The most interesting parts are the ones that are repeated several times within the same research. Repetition caught my attention when analysing the interviews. As women's rights were so easily discussed within the interviews, each interview talked about women's rights using particular words, frameworks and references.

I linked these words, frameworks and references to the literature and centralised three different narratives without claiming exclusivity. The three narratives evolve around women's dress, education and social pressures. The narratives are dynamic in every aspect, they have changed and will still change over time, some might disappear while other might evolve. But the interesting part is that these three narratives are easily brought back to the process of political socialisation young Palestinians go through. As Abu-Lughod (2009) emphasises the multiple meanings and understandings of women's rights more in general, Habashi (2017) emphasised the multiple identities young Palestinians encounter in their process of socialisation.

Eventually, qualitative research is personal research. Therefore, it seems very important to emphasise the impact of myself, as a researcher, on my thesis. As a white female non-religious pro-Palestinian researcher I have my own experiences, my own background and frameworks. Each and every person gives meaning to and responds differently in light of their own gender, cultural, political, religious and professional background. My research is only one out of many realities that can stem from fieldwork about women's rights in Hebron. But it is a reality. It emerged from the data collected on the ground.

3. Hebron

"Palestine is one land, as we believe it is one land. Two people are fighting over the land. There is the West Bank, there is Gaza and there is the other side which is called Israel. It is the same in Hebron. Hebron is one land, where two people are fighting. It is not the same. We don't have the Apartheid wall, but we have the Apartheid checkpoints. It reflects, it shows the real Palestine." (Saida, 2nd of February 2020, Hebron).

"For Palestinians, people who live in the Old City, close to where everything is happening and people who live in different parts of Hebron. They don't know what is happening down in the old city. So the Palestinian community in Hebron is also disconnected, the northern and southern side. It started after 1994-1997, the massacre followed by dividing the city and closing the main streets of the city. It has disconnected us, leaving the people living in the southern part in suffering. The northern part became the bubble of the city. People are convincing themselves of a normal life, but if they think about the situation they will realise that sooner or later everything is moving towards them as well." (Ali, 25th of January 2020, Hebron)

I spent about one month and a half in Hebron. My research actually started in Ramallah. As I arrived in Tel Aviv, I travelled to Jerusalem to pass Qalandia Checkpoint and reach Ramallah. Once I arrived in Ramallah, it was very easy to meet many different people. One hour in the hostel was enough to meet, not only internationals, but many Palestinians as well. As I started to introduce myself, my research was mentioned very quickly. I felt that focus shifted, from the moment I mentioned volunteering in Hebron, to Hebron. Palestinian friends warned me carefully. They

recommended me to spend more time in Ramallah. Hebron was described as a dangerous and tense place. *“What are you going to look for in Hebron?”*

Leaving for Hebron was not easy. I got so many warnings, from different sides, that I didn't know what to expect. It was quite clear that Hebron was an exceptional city among Palestinians inside and outside of Hebron but among Israelis as well. Located deep in the Palestinian West Bank Hebron hosts a holy site for the three biggest religions in the world: Islam, Christianity and Judaism (Weiner, 1997). It is a stumbling block over which the peace process will always fall (Serry, 2017). On top of that, Hebron is still the economic centre of Palestine, and maybe even of Israel. But it is a divided city. Divided between Palestinians and Israeli settlers and divided among Palestinians as well. The Hebron Agreement breached the city and its inhabitants dividing the thriving city into two separated parts (Saïd, 1997). Over the years, the people living in Area H1 became more and more distant from the people who are still living in Area H2. As Ali emphasised (see quote above) both people are living in a different reality. Their realities are grounded in the continuing settler colonial reality Israel holds on to, but differs as the people living in Area H2 are living aside Israeli settlers. Their neighbourhoods are full of checkpoints, roadblocks and movement barriers. They are not allowed to move freely. It makes life in Hebron complicated on many different levels.

I do want to include the most important historical developments of Hebron. I will start with these historical developments to continue with a short focus on human rights developments in Hebron, to eventually end with a part on Hebron's community. Hebron has a complex history and maybe an even more complex community but it seems essential to understand it, or at least parts of it, to be able to understand the narratives that evolve around women's rights.

The focus on Hebron is essential to understand where the thesis stems from. It stems from a self-critical analysis of Abu-Lughod (2013) who uses the generalising subcategory of Muslim. She emphasises how falling into the subcategories is easy when women's rights are framed in similar ways. However, Muslim women are living all around the world, not only in the Middle East, not only in Palestine. All different places where Muslim women are living today have a different history, sometimes fundamentally different – a different development of their society, community, culture and politics. The development of Hebron has been fundamentally different from the development of other Palestinian cities. It has affected their society, community, culture and politics to the bone. It is entangled and therefore necessary to understand it. The concept that Abu-Lughod (2009) introduced, the Social Life of Women's Rights, aimed to understand what happens when people actually start talking about and engaging with women's rights. If we want to understand this in Hebron, we need to understand what happened in Hebron and how it affected the society, community, culture and politics. This is what I will explain in the following three parts.

3.1. Historical developments

Among Palestinians living in and outside of Hebron, the city has always been considered to be a contested one where the entanglement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is really shown (Griffiths, 2017; Serry, 2017). For centuries Muslims and Jews lived alongside each other. The interactions between the Arab Muslim and Arab Jewish community, while profound, were less extensive than in Jerusalem (Klein, 2014, 59-60). This was the consequence of the small number of Jews living in Hebron. Sometimes small incidents between young Arab Muslims and Jews did happen but overall

the Muslim and Jewish communities lived peacefully together until tensions started to rise between the Palestinian and Zionist national identities at the end of the 1920's (Klein, 2014, 115-135). Palestinian people continued to protest against ongoing Zionist land purchases and immigrants as their numbers were growing fast. While resisting against the British who committed themselves to supporting the establishment of a Jewish national home in the Balfour Declaration. In 1929 the Jewish community was brutally attacked, massacred and murdered by members of Hebron's Muslim community. Arab Muslim families saved more than 400 Jewish neighbours and friends providing them shelter during the attacks, 67 Jews were killed. By the end of the 1930s the Jewish community was displaced by the British who tried to prevent another brutal escalation. Some Jewish inhabitants stayed but as tensions started to rise again, after the Al-Nakba in 1947, the whole Jewish community moved, mostly to Jerusalem.

It wasn't until 1968 that the Jewish community returned to Hebron (Clarke, 2000). A small group of Israeli inhabitants decided to book a local hotel in the Old City of Hebron to celebrate the Jewish Passover Holiday. They pretended to be Swedish tourists. However, when the celebrations were over the Israeli settlers refused to leave and declared their official intentions to stay and settle within the city. The Israeli government had always been united around Hebron eager to support and protect the settlers but settling in the Old City was sensitive. Every argument was brought back to the massacre of 1929 and every objection was seen by the settlers as a betrayal of the victims (Klein, 2014, 270-275). Months later, the first Israeli settlement was established as a compromise between the Israeli government and the most fundamentalist settlers in the West Bank. The settlers agreed to leave the Old City and settle on confiscated Palestinian land close to the city, later recognised by the Israeli government as Kriyat Arba' settlement. Over the years, more Israeli settlers found their way to Hebron as did their fundamentalist thoughts (Clarke, 2000). In 1979 fifteen Israeli women and their thirty-five children from Kriyat Arba squatted a building on Shuhada Street, the main street in the Old City of Hebron, known as Al Dabbuya or Beit Hadassah. Tense negotiations between the Israeli settlers and government ensued. However, when a group of young Israeli settlers were killed on their way to visit the women for Shabbat, the Israeli government sanctioned the Palestinians with the construction of the Israeli settlement within the Old City. From that moment onwards, the Israeli government continued to use the Jewish history in Hebron and Palestinian violence to justify the settlements, the destruction of the Old City and the excessive settler violence (Clarke, 2000; Platt, 2012). The settler violence against the Muslim community escalated in 1994 when a fundamentalist Israeli settler, Baruch Goldstein, killed and wounded over 120 Palestinians during morning prayers in Al-Ibrahimi Mosque. The Israeli government responded by endorsing an official policy of separation (Serry, 2017, 59-60). Shuhada Street was closed down for all Palestinian vehicles and pedestrians from time to time. Curfews were imposed and checkpoints were installed (Clarke, 2000). Al-Ibrahimi Mosque was closed down and eventually reopened for all Palestinian Muslims. However, only partly as Al-Ibrahimi Mosque was divided into a Muslim and Jewish part, the latter officially turning into a Synagogue. For Muslims the main entrance of the Mosque was no longer accessible.

The Hebron Agreement was still under full construction when Goldstein killed and wounded 120 Palestinians during morning prayers (Serry, 2017). Within the Oslo Accords the Palestinian Liberation Organisation had agreed with Israel to commit to the unity of the city of Hebron promising the division of security responsibility between the Palestinian Authority and Israel would not divide

the city. The Hebron Agreement was to become an extension of the Oslo Accords. However, after the Goldstein massacre the negotiations took a whole other turn. The Hebron Agreement, signed in 1997, eventually did divide the city into two different areas and assured the Israeli settlers their grip on the Old City (Clarke, 2000; B'tselem, 2019). Israel held onto full authority over Area H2, the area where the Old City is located. All Palestinians living in that area were put under Israeli military law and civil control of the Palestinian Authority. Security camera's, checkpoints and roadblocks were spread all around the Old City, operated by the Israeli military. The presence of the Israeli military assured Israeli settlers impunity. There are a number of cases in which Israeli settlers were never even arrested for brutally attacking Palestinians in and around the Old City. While the Old City is full of Israeli soldiers, only Israeli police officers hold the authority to arrest an Israeli settler. Israeli settlers are Israeli citizens, under Israeli civil law, an Israeli soldier is not allowed to do anything. Palestinians, on the other hand, do not have the protection of the Israeli citizenship. Being under military law allows Israeli soldiers to harass and arrest Palestinians whenever they want. About 35.000 Palestinians were put under Israeli military law in 1997 (B'tselem, 2019). Area H2 compromised almost twenty percent of the city, under full Israeli control, for only 500 Israeli settlers. Area H1 comprised the remaining eighty percent where around 250.000 Palestinians were living. As Area H1 and Area H2 adjacent to each other the border area was soon characterised by tensions and violence between Palestinians on one side and Israeli settlers and soldiers at the other side (Clarke, 2000).

When the Second Intifada erupted, the pressure on the Palestinian people who were still living in Area H2 accelerated (B'Tselem, 2019). New roadblocks and movement barriers were built, checkpoints enlarged and curfews imposed. Shuhada street was official closed down for all Palestinians (Mccan et al., 2017). Several Palestinian families could no longer enter their own houses through the entrance door as it was located in Shuhada street. During curfews Palestinians were forced to stay in their homes day and night for weeks and months, except for a few hours once or twice a week to enable them to supply their provisions. The curfews were usually imposed on the entire Area H2, sometimes only in certain neighbourhoods around the settlements, but never on the Israeli settlers (B'Tselem, 2019). Shops and business in the Old City were closed down and commercial activities were restricted continuously, pushing the commercial centre of Hebron to Area H1 (B'Tselem, 2003; B'Tselem, 2019). By the end of the Second Intifada the Israeli military had structured and organised their system of checkpoints and roadblocks designed to control the movement in all the areas around the Israeli settlements and the Al-Ibrahimi Mosque. The military defined five 'closed zones' in Area H2 that are completely closed off for Palestinians. These closed zones surround the Israeli settlements in the Old City, the Al-Ibrahimi Mosque and the Kriyat Arba settlement.

Today, the Old City of Hebron is almost completely abandoned (B'Tselem, 2019). From the 35.000 Palestinians living in the Area H2, 4.500 Palestinians are living right next to the Israeli settlements (OCHA, 2018). Nearly 260 houses in the closed and restricted part of Area H2 are abandoned as the military control and separate legal system have denied Palestinian inhabitants their full citizenship and rights (Amit & Yiftafel, 2016). Palestinian families are deprived of basic services: garbage is not collected, medical treatment and emergencies can only be carried out after immense difficulties and education is limited (B'Tselem, 2019). All daily affairs involve passing a checkpoint, inspections and restrictions. When the Israeli military decides to close a checkpoint, Palestinian

inhabitants are forced to use long bypass routes. Over 500 Palestinian shops were closed by military order and another 1.000 shops by their owners because of the restricted access for customers and suppliers (OCHA, 2018; B'Tselem, 2019). Commercial activities are now limited to some supermarkets, traditional workshops and tourist gift shops, as any trade requires leaving the area and moving the goods on foot through the checkpoints, along hundreds of meters. On top of that, the Israeli military frequently declared the neighbourhood around the settlements in the Area H2 a closed military zone (OCHA, 2018).

All Palestinians living in these neighbourhoods are then registered and checked at the military checkpoints (OCHA, 2018). Visitors are not allowed. The military presence in the Area H2 is inescapable for the Palestinian inhabitants as soldiers are stationed at almost every street corner, patrols are held on foot and by car, military trainings are organised at night and guard posts are forcibly installed on top of Palestinian houses. Palestinian inhabitants suffer false arrests on the streets and at home, in the dead of the night. Up until today the Israeli government justifies the official policy of separation of Hebron in terms of security. Over a thousand Israeli soldiers are stationed within the Old City of Hebron to assure protection and security over less than 700 Israeli settlers. At the same time the settler violence against Palestinians has become unbearable (Amit & Yiftafel, 2016). Harassment, intimidations and attacks are well planned and prepared intended to expand the Israeli settlements and cause Palestinians to leave their homes (B'Tselem, 2019). The Israeli military has always been aware of the harsh settler violence in the city. In some cases Israeli soldiers observe and abstain from intervening. Sometimes, they actively participate. According to the OCHA (2018) seventy percent of the Palestinian families living close by an Israeli settlement have at least one family member who experienced settler violence.

3.2. Young Hebronites

But how did this complex settler colonial reality actually affect young Palestinians living there? Over the years the distance between the people living in Area H1 and the people living in Area H2 broadened. For young Palestinians, growing up in a divided city as Hebron, it seems as if it was never easy to understand what life was like for people who were living in that other part of the city. Saida told me she didn't even know about the division between the two areas before the Second Intifada happened. As young Palestinians, all the interviewees were old enough to realise what happened during the Second Intifada. Ali, who moved to Hebron during the Second Intifada described it as follows: *"When we arrived I saw everything in real life. I saw it with my own eyes, it was something completely different. I can say that the person I am today is because of the Second Intifada."* Rachid emphasis the Second Intifada as a turning point. *"The Second Intifada confronted us as kids with the real face of the occupation."* But for Saida as well: *"At that time I realised what homeland means. What it means to say I'm Palestinian and this is my land."* Hebron changed since the Second Intifada. Marwan described Hebron as *"the sleeping lion"* during the Second Intifada. It took a while before protest occurred in Hebron, but once the wave of protests started, Hebron became the centre of it. As one of the more conservative cities in the West Bank and a Hamas-stronghold.

The Second Intifada affected Hebron on different levels (Amit & Yiftachel, 2016). The city had been divided for a few years already but many people were still processing what was actually happening to the Area H2. During the Second Intifada Israel hardened the restrictions and control on the area,

while the violence of Israeli settlers against Palestinian inhabitants became unbearable. A vast majority of the people living in Area H2 fled to Area H1. The Old City was no longer accessible for Palestinians who had been living in Hebron for centuries already (B'Tselem, 2019). The thriving heart of the city was moved from H2 to H1 as all shops and stores were closed down, on Israeli military order (B'Tselem, 2007). As Israel secured the physical barrier between the two areas, the mental barrier also grew. It was Deena who described the mental barrier in terms of race. Even though, racism is not the correct term to use here, it does show the intensity of the mental barrier that has been created. Stereotypes developed over the years. According to Saida the people who are still living in Area H2 are the conservative people, the ones reflecting the conservative character of the city. Their neighbourhoods are associated with guns and lawlessness. Families have been stuck in long-lasting enmity facing each other with guns. The Palestinian Authority lacks authority in the area to really change something. Shooting incidents happen on a weekly basis. Deena talked a lot about these stereotypes. They are very present, even in marriage: *"It is not good for you to marry somebody living there. It is not good for your safety."*

The settler colonial reality really did turn Hebron into two fundamentally different areas, divided by checkpoints, roadblocks, movement barriers, socio-economic differences and stereotypes as well (Clarke, 2000; B'Tselem, 2019). Today, Area H2 is inhabited by the lowest social-economic classes of Hebron's society, as Selma told me. Selma and her family moved into Area H2 in the midst of the Second Intifada to inhabit a house located next to an Israeli settlement. It was her uncle who convinced her father to move into the house as the house owner was being pressured by the Israeli authorities. If he declined to leave the house in Hebron, he would lose his Blue Card, which assured him access to Jerusalem. Selma described her parents' decision as political at first. The house needed to be inhabited by Palestinians to prevent Israeli settlers from taking it. But after, she emphasised the economic relevance as well. Her family had been suffering a lot, economically. The area was cheaper. Socio-economic differences, however, turned into stereotypes very quickly.

The people living in Area H1 really distanced themselves from the people living in Area H2. Not consciously however. It was Ali, a young Palestinian tour-guide, who was very sceptical about this distance. Away from the Israeli settlers, people living in Area H1, had created their fictional bubble in which they strain after normality, Ali told me. They do hear the stories and they know what is happening on the other side of Hebron, but they don't have any affiliation with it. They do realise life is worse for the people living alongside the Israeli settlements, the people who are confronted with the settler and military violence every day. They also know some people who are still living in the area. But still, stereotypes don't seem to change. The gap between the two areas is growing. Today, about a thousand Palestinian families, who were able to afford it, left Area H2. The ones living on the edge of poverty are still there. Palestinians living in the two areas are alienated. Palestinians living in Area H1 are talking about the Palestinian people in Area H2 as distant acquaintances. As people they do know but can't really relate to. So stereotypes prevail.

For me, after two months, the physical and mental barrier between the two area and the two people seemed quite straightforward. The issue came forward in so many different informal and formal conversations, the same conversations in which I tried to grasp how women's rights were really understood in Hebron. Especially when I was talking with Deena. Deena emphasised the fundamental difference between women's rights, freedom and equality for women living in Area H1 and women living in Area H2. *"The women living in this area they are struggling more than the*

women living in H1.” But when Hebron is discussed excessively in literature, it fails to encompass this mental barrier alongside the physical one. The exceptionality of Hebron is emphasised but limited to the experiences, thoughts and realities of people living in Area H2. Scholars focused on how the Hebron Agreement divided the city (Saïd, 1997; Weiner, 1997, Klein, 2014; Amit & Yiftachle, 2016; Griffiths, 2017; Serry, 2017). Other scholars used personal stories of Israeli and Palestinians living in Area H2 to understand how the city developed itself (Platt, 2012; Klein, 2014). Stories that were grounded in the scholars’ fieldwork in the city. But they fail to encompass the complexity of the city. Hebron is exceptional for a number of reasons. However, what I have written will not manage to bridge the gap in the literature. But in order to understand how agency of the young Palestinians is developed and how they can use it in return, we need to understand this very particular barrier in Hebron’s society.

4. Young Palestinians’ agency

As we understand the particular city in which these young Palestinians have grown up, we still need to understand what it actually means to be young and to grow up in Hebron. Several scholars have addressed the importance and relevance of youth’s political agency in Palestinian societies (McEvoy-Levy, 2001; Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, Gavray & Born, 2012; Maira, 2013; Høiglit, 2016; Habashi, 2017). Countering a limited Western perspective on agency, all scholars pinpoint young Palestinians as the main focus of their research to contradict a top-down model of socialisation. Within this model political socialisation is described as the socialisation of youth who, first and foremost, duplicate the political views and beliefs of their parents. As if a process of socialisation is limited to the household (Habashi, 2017, 17-18). Young people, however, do interact constantly with the broader society. Their identity is constructed in a complex process through differences in class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, residence and exposure to violence. A complex process in which the perception of ones parents and family will interact with social, cultural and political experiences of youth themselves.

All young Palestinians, today, who grew up in the West Bank or Gaza, have known no other reality than a settler colonial one (Veracini, 2013). Young Palestinians living in Hebron, for example, have constructed a normality within a divided settler colonial city. They are trying to cope with the violence, limited freedom of movement, limited social and economic mobility and insecurity that intensified since the first Israeli settlement was built (B’Tselem, 2019). Their political agency is formed in interaction with their own community and its history, their religion, the political structure, the educational system and their peers (Habashi, 2017, 21-22). In Hebron, the economic capital of Palestine, the reality and political agency of Palestinian youth is characterised by debt crisis, high unemployment and poverty rates.

Thousands of young Palestinians are working two or three jobs to pay back debts and support their families. Meanwhile the Palestinian Authority has failed to maintain unity among the Palestinian people or to counter Israel (Maira, 2013). The contested elections of 2007, in Gaza, where Hamas took most of the seats, meant the official split of Hamas and Fateh (Shaban, 2016). As Israel and Egypt imposed the blockade of Gaza, the political split between both parties intensified. The national unity was believed to be broken, and still is. Saida confirmed this – *“They are separating the Palestinian people. That is why I hate them.”* At the same time, people lost all faith in the

Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority is believed, in the public opinion, to be the puppet of Israel while corrupting their own regime. When I asked Ali about the Palestinian Authority, he told me: “...we can't get rid of these corrupted people because Israel continues to support them. They are trying to get rid of their responsibilities by leaving us to the Palestinian Authority.”

Young people of Palestine are frustrated and pessimistic (Al-Sakka, 2017). They are actively engaging with the political complexity of Palestine, eager to change the political status quo and to achieve more while the broader society is staying behind. So young Palestinians have created their own political agency, actively, but it does not assure engagement in political activism (Habashi, 2017, 177-179). Only two of the nine interviewees were more actively involved in political activism.

Different variables influenced their step towards political activism – ranging from education to personal relations and gender (Habashi, 2017, 177-179). For many among them the most meaningful way, today, to engage politically is actually striving to simply live a normal life and affirm it in the complex settler colonial reality Hebron still is (Richter-Devroe, 2008). This brings up a second issue, the resilience of Palestinian youth. Many researchers have tried to understand what it is like growing up in a context of social suffering and political complexity, focussing on what is wrong with young Palestinians (Nguyen-Gillham, Glacaman, Naser & Boyce, 2006). These researchers belittle the resilience of young people confronted with social suffering, as they tend to follow a Western conceptualisation of resilience. Resilience is valued through individual and social suffering, without considering the communal support within a society. The complexity of the socio-political reality in Palestine is immense, people are confronted with settler colonialism through movement restrictions, demolitions and violence on a daily basis. But people have been confronted with this complexity for decades already as Hebron's intense history shows. Through their communities, their social networks, people have learned to build up resistance. The resilience is about more than only the individual illnesses. For many young Palestinians, growing anxiety and desolation is intermingled with optimism, political activism and togetherness. Young Palestinians still foster aspirations and dreams as other young people do. Within the interviews I really wanted to depart from this idea. From the fact that young Palestinians are not merely victims in an ongoing conflict. Young Palestinians do have their own agency, their own way of looking at their society and its gender issues.

One of the main differences in young Palestinians identity is gender (Spellings, Barber & Olsen, 2012; Habashi, 2017). Gender is completely entangled in the process of socialisation, meaning the political agency of young Palestinians differs for young women and young men. The agency of young women, in a context as Palestine, encompasses a wide range of possibilities and limitations. Gender is a relational concept that aims to reveal the normative power structures that substantiate the Palestinian society and the Palestinian struggle. It constrains men and women's agency in public and private spheres. As emphasised by Scott (1986) gender is a constitutive element of social relations built upon the perceived differences between men and women, whereas gender has become a primary way of signifying relationships of power. Gender is still a social construction meaning that women and men are socialised differently, while being confronted with the same complex Palestinian reality of settler colonialism and repression (McKenna, 2015; Kelly, 2008). It makes both women and men defensively engaged in society while their resilience is built upon a whole different positionality. As the outcome of the Israeli settler colonial project has been very different for women, confronted with their vulnerability in the public and private sphere, making

them victims of domestic and settler violence more often (Holt, 1996; Holt, 2003). However, political engagement is expressed differently by women, mostly due to social and familial prohibitions, they are still very aware of their political agency (Nguyen-Gillham, Glacaman, Naser & Boyce, 2006).

To a certain extent, Palestinian society and culture do feature discriminatory gender roles. As Deena referred to women in Hebron as belonging to “...a second class.” in Hebron’s society. She was talking about how women do have more access to jobs today but are still payed less than men. She found it very frustrating. Murat repeated what Deena said “*The society here is using women by paying them less.*” While Idris told me the following: “*The situation is very good today, especially for women. Women are working, women are educated, women can decide if they want to marry.*” The gender perspective aims to cover these kinds of differences and similarities between young women and men. But mostly to uncover what women’s rights actually imply for both women and men. It is Hodgson (2011) who emphasizes the need to understand human rights, which includes women's rights, through the eyes of both men and women. Young Palestinians have grown up in a different generation as their parents. Within this generation traditional gender roles have been challenged and domestic relations are believed to fairer (Ladadwa, 2017). So it is essential to understand the context in which young Palestinians, in Hebron, are living to be able to understand their thoughts and questions on women’s rights.

5. The Social Life of Muslim Women’s Rights

5.1. Development of the human rights discourse in Palestine

The development of the human rights discourse in Palestine seems important to understand when trying to make sense of the narratives young Palestinians used when talking about women’s rights. The local historical development of reliance on the human rights discourse is inextricably intertwined with Palestinian politics (Allen, 2013,12-13). The human rights discourse has always been criticised in a Palestinian society. When I arrived in Hebron, ready to start volunteering with Youth Against Settlements (YAS), I came to understand what this critical perspective actually entailed.

The United Nations initiated international presence in Hebron from March 1994 until January 2019 (Baruch & Zur, 2019). When Israel decided to end the mandate of the TIPH I remember myself being frustrated. So when I arrived in Hebron, a year later, I somehow assumed people would feel the same way. So I initiated informal conversations about the TIPH and the human rights discourse several times. Arslan, the coordinator of YAS, is recognised as a human rights defender by Amnesty International. International recognition supported the visibility of Hebron as a city crumbling under the pressure of Israel. Arslan was convinced of the advantages connected to the recognition as human rights defender. Mohammed and Idris were less convinced. Not precisely about Arslan’s recognition as human rights defenders, but more about the value of a human rights discourse and mostly the value of a human rights industry. “*It is not like they have been doing much.*” While the recognition by Amnesty International assured visibility, scepticism and cynicism about the human rights discourse and industry, more in general, were never far away. Lori Allen (2013) centralised these complex tensions within a Palestinian society. The tensions between the human rights discourse on one side and, the institutionalised human rights industry on the other. It

seems valuable to explain parts of it, to understand where the cynicism stems from and how it affects the way young Palestinians are discussing women's rights.

It was the Palestinian Liberation Organisation that started to build on the human rights discourse engaging with the United Nations as Israel was entrenching the settler colonial reality further and further (Allen, 2013, 43). Throughout the 1970s the human rights discourse was introduced to Palestinian people ((Allen, 2013, 34-35). Despite the local dismissal of the human rights ideology as a false universality that legitimizes the concrete politics of Western imperialism, military interventions and neo-colonialism, the ideology did emphasise the nationalist struggle among the Palestinian people. Al-Haq was the first Palestinian human rights organisation, established in 1979, to build upon the nationalist potential of the human rights discourse. At that time, the human rights discourse was still mostly unknown for many Palestinian people. However, Al-Haq managed to reveal the brutality of the Israeli settler colonial structure to the international community using the normative discourse the international community had created itself. Focus shifted solely to internationally accepted human rights laws and how Israel had continued to ignore them (Hajjar, 2001). Through this focus Al-Haq gained support and recognition in the Palestinian society. Al-Haq used the potential of the human rights discourse to objectify the claim of Palestinians instrumentalising human rights law as an objective standard against which Israeli practices could be measured (Allen, 2013, 35-37). It became a part of how the Palestinian human rights workers, politicians and people expressed their political demands. It didn't take long before other human rights organisations joined Al-Haq challenging the legal status of Israel's 'military occupation'. As time passed, the human rights discourse and the rising number of human rights organisations became more and more institutionalised (Hodgson, 2011, 1-2). Trying to balance between the international and local community Al-Haq continued to focus on propinquity and credibility while holding on to religion as well.

When the First Intifada erupted as a struggle of the people, the whole Palestinian society was mobilised (Johnson & Kuttab, 2001). Men took centre stage, women instrumentalised their traditional roles and youth protested alongside their parents, while the human rights industry tried to hold on to their human rights resistance. Convinced of a non-violent approach the human rights organisations continued to emphasise the relevance of eyewitness reports, unemotional testimonies, affidavits and databases of violations (Allen, 2013, 36-37). But the Palestinian people were united, for the first time in a nationalist struggling, glorifying non-violent and violent resistance against the excessive Israeli military force. The First Intifada transformed the human rights industry in Palestine as the Israeli military used excessive violence to push the popular protests down (Hajjar, 2001). Images of Israeli tanks standing in front of young Palestinians throwing stones travelled around the world. The international attention to the situation in the West Bank and Gaza increased directly, local and international human rights organisations started to work together more intensively using the internet as their main linkage. Consciousness about the human rights discourse and its use started to increase within a Palestinian society. People started to use the discourse among each other, in almost every level of the Palestinian society.

The social solidarity on which the First Intifada had been build, ended abruptly when the Oslo Accords were signed in September 1993 (Johnson & Kuttab, 2001; Allen, 2013, 8-10). The Palestinian Liberation Organisation had negotiated and signed the Accords in agreement with Israel, constructing the Palestinian Authority. Focus shifted completely to the Accords away from

the human rights violating practices conducted before, during and after the First Intifada (Allen, 2013, 66-67). While the Palestinian Authority internalised the Western neoliberal discourse, emphasising a normalisation of the relations between Israel and Palestine, they detached themselves completely from a big part of the Palestinian people. Especially from Hebron, as Marwan explained. The Palestinian Authority was built upon the grounds of Fateh and aimed to push Hebron to the side, as much as possible. Hebron was known as a Hamas-stronghold. The Western support for the Oslo Accords and the Palestinian Authority was built upon the same neoliberal interests trying to maintain a good relation with Israel while supporting the increasing number of international human rights organisations (Habashi, 2017, 188). Palestinian societies flooded with non-governmental organisations and international donors who centralised the human rights discourse that was once introduced by Al-Haq (Hilal, 2015). International presence was reassured in Hebron. The objective of Al-Haq had always been credibility towards the international community and the Palestinian people. But when the Palestinian society flooded with human rights organisations the Palestinian Authority received most of the international funding.

The human rights industry became more and more dependent on the Palestinian Authority for financing and sustainability. Within this flow of funding the Palestinian Authority developed a new level of institutionalised politics, built upon that neoliberal discourse, in which individuality was centralised along with the professionalisation of human rights organisations (Hilal, 2015). Individuality reflected in corruption and clientelism. Not only the Palestinian Authority, the human rights industry as well lost all adherence with the Palestinian people (Hajjar, 2001). The human rights industry had been instrumentalised as a technocratic tool as if the human rights discourse could be taught and mastered regardless of the political complexity on the ground (Allen, 2013, 3-4). Marwan described this change as continuing up until today. The change initiated by the Palestinian Authority and international non-governmental organisations tried to develop a Western thought in a Palestinian society, as Hebron. *“They were taking so many things from the West, they brought these things, but things that don’t fit here. They brought things that simply don’t fit the Palestinian community.”*

But the Oslo Accords never addressed the human rights violations properly as all emphasis was on security and territory, in the advantage of Israel (Hilal, 2015). As it became more clear that individual gain of politicians was centralised and foreign funding was to support this, the credibility of the human rights system within the Palestinian society started to crumble (Allen, 2013, 90-91). By the time the Second Intifada broke out the Palestinian human rights organisations had lost their central role completely.

The Second Intifada didn’t erupt out of the same grassroots of the Palestinian society as the first one (Allen, 2013, 8-9). The Palestinian people were observing the protests rather than participating in them. After Oslo everything had become politicised and corrupted. Even the Second Intifada felt for many Palestinians as a loss. As Ali told me: *“The First Intifada didn’t achieve anything either, but it showed the Palestinian unity.”* The Second Intifada was no longer a nationalist struggle rather an individualised one led by Fateh. As the Second Intifada ended, the Palestinian society stabilised again.

However, still stuck in the settler colonial structures held up by Israel (Allen, 2013, 187-188). Human rights organisations lost all their adherence. For many Palestinians it felt like the human rights

organisations were preoccupied with pleasing international donors and securing their own sustainability rather than with local issues connected to the settler colonial reality they were living in. Human rights organisations and NGO's in general lost their moral authority failing to practice what they actually preach. Regarding human rights in general and women's rights more specific. As they continued advocacy for women's rights in a Palestinian society while failing to address the most important pressure on women, the settler colonial reality (Duffield, 2001; Hodgson, 2011). The human rights discourse had turned the Palestinian struggle against the settler colonial reality of Israel into projects and policies detached from reality, to get money out of it (Allen, 2013, 87-89). To this extent human rights organisations became part of a corrupted power of international donors reproducing soft colonialism. International donors were still the ones deciding about projects and policy in line with their neoliberal political objectives, rather than the objective of Palestinian people (Allen, 2013, 67-68). A small group of human rights organisations developed a certain elite sector in which perks as international travel, company cars and relatively high salaries were common (Hajjar, 2001). For many Palestinians this extravagant lifestyle was a betrayal of the nationalist struggle. For Marwan it showed how Palestinians continued to take over Western lifestyles, Western thoughts and practices without considering their applicability in a Palestinian society. Human rights organisations failed to understand the lived experience religion in a society as Hebron. They failed to understand what Islam actually meant for him. Within this context, cynicism about the human rights discourse and industry intensified among many Palestinian people (Allen, 2013, 3-5).

My presence in Hebron was easily associated with my volunteering with Youth Against Settlements. Informal talks about my being in Hebron centralised my volunteering and YAS. I encountered different critical accounts about the international campaigns YAS had organised over the years. Referring to the funding received to support an international campaign that lacks involvement of Palestinians living in the neighbourhood. I cannot say I recognised an instrumentalization. I did recognise, at some point, a detachment of the organisation and the broader society of Hebron. However, it did not necessarily mean everyone abolished everything associated with human rights (Allen, 2013, 187-188). Inaz had been working with a Palestinian human rights organisation for just a few months when I met her. We discussed the centrality of the human rights discourse in an informal way. Inaz emphasised the value of human rights but addressed the burden as well. The fact that she was struck documenting human rights violations while being unable to actually change something frustrated her. In the future she wanted to be able to actually do something valuable. She was happy but critical. It seemed as if Palestinian people did create a certain cynicism and scepticism towards the human rights industry rather than towards human rights themselves. Their cynicism and scepticism became a part of a process in which people are critical but do still search, or at least hope, to support their nationalist struggle.

In a society as Hebron, where religion has been historically more centralised as in other Palestinian cities (see above) the human rights discourse was always received a bit more critically. This is especially the case for Palestinians living in Area H2. The Temporary International Presence in Hebron, supported by the United Nations, was active for about twenty years (Baruch & Zur, 2019). In the meantime, nothing has actually changed. It is true, however, that the complexity and brutality of the reality in Hebron – and Palestine, more broadly – lends itself readily to the human rights discourse. The discourse has been used, so many times, but nothing has changed. The Palestinian

Authority lacks all state-sovereignty and credibility to assure any kind of rights while Israel assures themselves credibility in Western societies as the only democracy in the Middle East valuing human rights.

Before turning towards the human rights discourse in Hebron, it does feel important to understand critical accounts towards the human rights discourse, as these were repeatedly mentioned in the interviews. For a long time the human rights discourse was believed to be the strongest discourse to assure visibility of issues (Allen, 2013, 1-2). Women's rights were translated as human rights in an attempt to empower the strife for gender equality, the improvement of women's legal and political status and the protection of women from sexualised violence in Muslim societies. This is why the discourse is still used, in an organisation as Youth Against Settlements (YAS) and in the organisation where Inaz is working, up until today. However, the human rights discourse ignores the cultural and social aspects of Muslim societies too easily. The fact is that women's rights – recognised as human rights – are not neutral. Women's rights, as we understand them in the West today, are the outcome of an intense process of selection, struggle and consensus-building among mostly Western states in a neoliberal distanced institution as the United Nations (Hodgson, 2011, 4-5). The human rights discourse was built upon an internalised Orientalist perspective, as once introduced by Said (Abu-Lughod, 2009). Gender Orientalism explains the gendered racialisation of the Orient as the opposite of the Occidental (Khalid, 2014). Throughout history the West has been constructing particular images of the Orient – associated most with Muslim societies – as irrational, backwards, exotic and despotic to oppose the images of the Occidental. The Occidental was civilised, rational, moral and Christian. These images, according to Said, continued to influence further engagements with the Orient, up until today. The Occidental emphasises the necessity to protect women's rights in Muslim societies but fails to encompass their own contribution to that violence. The violence against Muslim women is described as a legacy of the backwardness and brutal Arab masculinity to which women are subjected (Abu-Lughod, 2009). Especially in Palestine. A little cynical, Ali laughed with this responsibility of the West. *"We lost something, we lost our land, because of you, so you could have your freedoms."* But Western eurocentrism prevents us to actually acknowledge our contribution to the violent settler colonial reality Palestine faces today. Even though domestic forms of violence are still real, they are not conclusive. In many Muslim societies women's rights are more impacted by dragging conflicts and complexity in which Western states do have their share, but continue to ignore it. The West, through institutions as the United Nations, has held on to the Orientalist perspective sustaining their own superiority. The human rights discourse internalises the Gendered Orientalist perspective to guarantee an implementation of women's rights in Muslim societies. Convinced that women's rights will bring stability as the equality between men and women would 'finally' be addressed (Hodgson, 2011, 10-11). Local conflict, society and culture are ignored completely trying to fit Muslim societies into the idealised Western culture.

5.2. Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH)

The local conflict, society and culture are all the more relevant in a city as Hebron, but rather ignored or interpreted wrongfully. In this short passage, I will focus on the application of the human rights discourse in the particular context of Hebron. The human rights discourse has been frequently used to emphasise the suffering of Palestinians in Hebron (B'tselem, 2019). Especially, the suffering of

Palestinian women. For years now, human rights organisations have been present in the city reporting the human rights violations of Israeli settlers, soldiers and police officers (Helland-Hansen, 2004). The first official peacekeeping mission was deployed by the United Nations in 1994 as a response to the Goldstein massacre. The United Nations Security Council called for a temporary international presence after which the Palestinian Liberation Organisation came to agree with Israel on the Temporary International Presence in the City of Hebron (TIPH). The objective of the TIPH was *“to provide by their presence a feeling of security to the Palestinians of Hebron”* (United Nations, 1994, Art. 3a). From 1994 until 2019 human rights observers carried out daily patrols documenting rights abuses they witnessed (Baruch & Zur, 2019).

All human rights violations were reported to both Israeli and Palestinian authorities as to the TIPH-member countries on a weekly basis (Baruch & Zur, 2019). Every six months the mandate of the TIPH could be extended, however, only by mutual consent of the Israeli government and Palestinian Authority. The mandate included observers from Norway – as the coordinating country – reinforced with staff from six countries changing every mandate. Since 1994 the mandate of the TIPH has been criticised frequently by Israel and the United States. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu frequently accused the human rights observers of partiality in favour of the Palestinians. The TIPH reports had always criticised Israel’s activities and questioned the legitimacy of the Israeli settlements and related policies.

Within the Old City hostility between human rights observers and Israeli settlers accelerated over the years (Baruch & Zur, 2019). Israeli settlers continued to pressure the Israeli government criticising the human rights observers who, according to the settlers, hindered the Israeli military to protect them properly while emphasising their right to remain in the city. In January 2019 Netanyahu officially ended the mandate of the TIPH.

The mandate of the TIPH had been built upon the human rights discourse. The complexity of the settler colonial reality was translated into the human rights discourse to allegedly assure a strong discourse that would expand the visibility of the situation in Hebron (Hodgson, 2011, 1-2). The neutrality of the human rights discourse was used to encourage the implementation of the Hebron Agreement but failed to do so. Using the human rights discourse gave the United Nations the possibility to rebuke Israeli soldiers and settlers for their excessive use of violence against Palestinians. However, without questioning the state of Israel for what it is, a settler colonial state (Veracini, 2013). The approach of the United Nations neglects the settler colonial reality Israel has created the past decades. It is a social formation that needs to be distinct from a colonial one as the objective is fundamentally different. A settler colonial project aims to replace the indigenous people. Today, the Israeli state continues a settler colonial project through an excessive settlement policy, frequent cuts in water and electricity supply and restricted freedom of movement. These intimidations are thought through as the Israeli state hopes it will eventually push Palestinians to leave their land. The complexity of Hebron could actually be understood and addressed properly when settler colonialism would be used as a framework (Amit & Yiftachel, 2016). But when it comes to Israel, the United Nations seems to have a double standard (Ortiz, 2004).

The human rights discourse is used to cover the United Nations’ lack of moral authority (Ortiz, 2004). While rebuking Israel for the violations of human rights, they ignore the harsh settler colonial reality the state of Israel has created. The United Nations supported the Hebron Agreement and

created the Temporary International Presence in the City of Hebron (TIPH) but never really recognised the complex reality of the city of Hebron. Evaluating the settler colonial reality in Hebron today, it seems as if not much has changed.

5.3. Abu-Lughod's concept

Abu-Lughod actually built up her concept 'the Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights' around the same critical accounts and thoughts I described above (Abu-Lughod, 2009). The fact that local conflicts, society and culture are ignored in the human rights discourse makes it impossible to actually understand what women's rights mean in a society as Hebron. As the exceptional and conceptual character of Hebron has been explained alongside the development of the human rights discourse, the next step is to further explain what Abu-Lughod actually meant by 'The Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights' and why it is so important to have all this background information.

The Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights could be understood as built upon several critical accounts Abu-Lughod made throughout her intellectual journey. These critical accounts centralise, as my research does, the human rights discourse and the centrality of women's rights within it. Abu-Lughod pinpoints the United States' intervention in Afghanistan as a crucial moment for the development of the gendered orientalist images of Muslim women I discussed above (Abu-Lughod, 2013, 27). In the direct aftermath of 9/11 culture was believed to form a new insurmountable and ever growing cleavage between the Occidental and Orient society (Abu-Lughod, 2013, 6-7). Today, Muslim societies are centralised in popular political debates without questions about the complex historical developments within the Middle East. It seems as if nobody is wondering how repressive regimes grounded and what role Western countries played in that grounding. Women are centralised as potent symbols of Islamic societies, identities and modernity (Abu-Lughod, 1998). However, after analysing the interviews it seemed as if the same centrality of women in an Islamic society was reproduced several times. Women were to represent the broader society, identity and mostly modernity. All descriptions of Hebron and its conservative character somehow referred to women. And mostly, to the way women dress. It is not to say that all young Palestinians ignore the complex settler colonial reality they grew up in. It is to say that the focus on women and women's rights divert attention away of other essential features. It is easy to describe a society by the way women are dressed, it is just not accurate. It does not tell us anything about how those society actually work.

Abu-Lughod (2010) continues to emphasis the relevance of understanding these different larger structural features that have affected the rights of Muslim women all over the world. In a Palestinian society, these features are still very much connected to the continuing settler colonial reality. Among Palestinians the responsibility of Israel in the settler colonial reality is pinpointed repeatedly besides the cultural-attached features of a Palestinian society. The settler colonial reality is essential to understand a city as Hebron. Both Ali and Saida emphasised this, but also gave some perspective: *"It is not the main reason, but as I told you before but because we are really closed, especially here in Hebron. We are fed up. We are sick of this life. It created our own conflict, between each other."* Ali responded in a very similar way when I asked him if he felt that the settler colonial reality was responsible for the pressure on women. *"Yes, of course. But we should not blame the occupation for everything. It has a lot to do with these issues, but at the same time we have a responsibility as Palestinians as well. The occupation does not come to me to force my*

sister to marry right. The pressure from people. The occupation has created a small enemy or hatred inside every person. People want to show inside the community, a psychological influence of the occupation, than physical one. It is a result on the occupation."

Eventually, Abu-Lughod turns towards the human rights discourse and its development I discussed above. Within her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) she aimed to discover what the human rights discourse, as mediated in the halls of the United Nations, hides from us about the everyday lives of Muslim women. About these features that actually define women's positionality in a Muslim society. The past two decades women's rights have grown and consolidated as a global feminist concern. Women's rights were translated into human rights and put on the agendas of various United Nations bodies and intergovernmental organisations.

The human rights discourse insists a universality all around the world, it emphasises the responsibility to measure a society up in universal humanity aspiring for gender equality and women's freedom. Abu-Lughod (2013) recognises the value of the discourse. Appealing to it invokes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. Hodgson (2011) agrees with Abu-Lughod and emphasises how long-standing issues have been translated into the language of human rights to expand their visibility. In general the institutionalisation and translation of women's rights to human rights does empower the strife for gender equality, women's freedom and improvement of women's legal and political status. Since women's rights have become an inextricable part of the human rights discourse at the end of the 1970s, women's rights can't be detached from the human rights discourse anymore. However, as stated before, the human rights discourse does not really consider localities. Both Abu-Lughod and Hodgson criticise the human rights discourse as a contemporary form of imperial intervention. It judges, mostly Muslim societies, while ignoring the value of cultural and social aspects of their societies (Hodgson, 2011,1-2; Abu-Lughod, 2013, 201-203). It emphasises universality as applicable in each and every society and assumes universality to be neutral. In reality, however, it is part of a neoliberal political strategy. The assumption that the human rights discourse is neutral ignores the deep-seated gender-related and cultural ideas about what it means to be human, what it means to be either a man or a woman.

Even in between Hebron and Ramallah these deep-seated gender-related and cultural ideas differ. And this is also why I chose to centralise Abu-Lughod's conceptualisation of women's rights. Because Abu-Lughod emphasises how the understanding of women's rights is different in every society and how the understanding can change over time. Women's rights are not discussed in a socio-political vacuum (Abu-Lughod, 2010). People are engaged with these concepts, trying to learn from them, criticising them and taking advantage of them. It influences the way other people understand women's rights and the way they interact with them. Different narratives have been constructed about women's rights, about their meaning and their relevance. This is why I committed a significant part of my thesis on the development of the human rights discourse in a Palestinian society and on Hebron. The development of the human rights discourse describes the way Palestinian people have been engaging with and talking about women's rights. It describes how women's rights have been used to become an inherent part of the human rights discourse. The focus on Hebron emphasises historical developments, Hebron's society and young people living within it. Because we can't understand how young Palestinians are talking about women's rights if we don't understand the context in which these young people were socialised. But what exactly

makes Hebron so exceptional? And how does this exceptionality affect the way young Palestinians are engaging with women's rights?

6. The exceptionality of Hebron

6.1. Hebron is one hand

"The traditions in Hebron are different from other Palestinian cities. People are part of one hand." (Rachid, 4th of February 2020, Hebron)

"We become one hand when something real is happening, when it is necessary." (Saida, 2nd of February 2020, Hebron)

Hebron's society is a strong one built upon tight family lines, religion and tradition. Over the years an intercut social network has developed itself. Hebronite people are belonging to one and the same hand. Belonging to this one hand was described by Saida, Deena and Ali as an emotional sentiment, an indescribable feeling of togetherness built upon their shared love for their lives, their absolute belief in a tomorrow. Everybody knows everybody. *"People know each other, which is a good and bad thing at the same time."* Ever since the Palestinian Authority intensified neoliberal policies, the number of Palestinian families facing poverty increased but remained invisible on the streets, up until today (Hilal, 2015). It took about a month before I was confronted with poverty on the streets of Hebron. The confrontation with the old women sitting on the streets begging for money made me realise how invisible poverty had been before. It was Mohammed who emphasised the firm solidarity Hebron's society was built upon and Rachid who confirmed it. Rachid emphasised how nobody in Hebron goes to sleep hungry. *"We care about people's feelings. If I give you the coffee with my right hand, my left hand shouldn't know. It means you shouldn't go and tell people you gave something or supported somebody."* To this extent the strong social network assures both solidarity and modesty. However, that same social network seems to pressure people as well. *"There are tens of thousands people living here, but everybody knows everybody. This is something really special about Hebron. In a way which is strange."* It is Deena who emphasised this strange characteristic of Hebron's society. It seems as if the idea of solidarity becomes more conditional when money and trade are centralised. People in Hebron are extremely friendly and helpful, but you can't break the rules. You can't differ too much from traditions, as Imahd, told me. As a tour-guide, Ali meets many different people, from all around the world. Once during Ramadan, a close friend was visiting him in Hebron. When she left the same day, Ali hugged her, as a way of saying goodbye. A few days later, his father already knew about the hug. Ali does not consider himself religious, but it is not allowed to have physical contact during Ramadan with someone. His father knows but emphasised how he couldn't just hug her in public. *"Yes, you can hug her, but just not in public."*

Passing traditions is an inherent part of the process of socialisation (Asad, 2015). Young Palestinians grow up to learn and relearn how to behave in particular contexts, how to do things with words and how to conform their body. It includes embodied practices that help to understand certain sensitivities and propensities through repetition until it becomes redundant. It embraces a body of ideas and practices that helps to align behaviour in a community. Religion is an important source of tradition. When a community is religious, traditions will be entangled with religious

practices. It seems important to differ religion from tradition, as the same differences were emphasised in the interviews. It was Marwan who talked about a certain loss of religion in Hebron. According to Marwan, today religion is only practiced during prayers. In daily endeavours religion has been put aside and replaced by other traditions and familial decisions about religion.

Deena emphasised the same difference when we were talking about her position as a young woman in Hebron. It was not religion that pressured her, rather tradition. It is because a particular part of her family is more traditional, that she needs to wear the full Islamic dress when she meets them. It is not enwritten in the Koran. She will always wear her hijab, however, because it reflects her personal commitment to her religion. In Hebron she will always wear more long-sleeved clothing, while in Ramallah she would wear jeans. Why? Not because she is less religious in Ramallah, rather because traditions in Ramallah are different. *“In Ramallah no one even looks at you, but in Hebron everybody knows you.”*

6.2. Breathing through the economic lungs of Palestine

Another important segment of Hebron's society is its economy. It was Idris who told me *“Hebron is still the economic lung of Palestine and even Israel.”* Hebron's economy has been vital for Palestine for centuries (Ighbareyeh et al., 2018). The district surrounding Hebron is characterized by a variety of topography, altitude and climate . It has made Hebron one of the most important and fertile lands in Palestine. Hebron has developed an extensive agricultural market alongside a trading centre with thriving glass and leather manufacturers. While other Palestinian cities' economy was solely based on trade. Economic activities have always been centralised within Hebron's society, up until today. But according to different interviewees, it might be one of its weaknesses as well. The centrality of economic activities reflects itself in appearances. Hebron's society, as mentioned, is a strong and closely connected society. But according to Deena the money in the city and the focus on trade is making people judgemental. It matters what you wear, what you do and who you are associated with. Even though, so many people are confronted with growing unemployment and poverty rates, just as many people are judging on money and appearances. Deena explained: *“People are judging on you by the way you look, by the cars you have, by your job, by the amount of money you make, ... Not all people in Hebron are like this, but still.*

Money and appearances are entangled with how family lines ingrain themselves into the city's structure. Early February a young man was killed over money-issues between two prominent Hebronite families. When the news about his death spread in the city, the city turned quiet. In Hebron, where strong family lines persist, family law can be considered the basis of law enforcement. The shooting incident integrated the Palestinian legal system in a range of formal and informal talks I had during my last week in Hebron. Mohammed tried to explain what happens after a shooting incident. I saw the city closing down and the tensions rising. When somebody is wounded or killed during a shooting incident the Palestinian police does intervene. However, their intervention is completely rooted in Palestinian family law. Before persecution can be discussed, the one responsible for the shooting incidents needs to take responsibility. Only when responsibility is publicly taken, the persecution process can actually start. Otherwise, the police will obligate both families to close their shops, to stay inside and to limit contacts outside of one's families because tensions might rise again. To this extent the police facilitates the whole process that is founded in

Palestinian family law. Up until today family law enjoys credibility in a Palestinian society. Usually, the families will settle and prosecute, with money.

Saida tried to explain why Palestinians, living in the same city, would start to shoot each other: *"...and now we are fed up with each other. We can't stand each other. We had enough."* Kelly (2008) emphasises similar thoughts in her research about the ordinary life during the Second Intifada. Alongside the spectacular acts of violence that happened during the Second Intifada and after, for most Palestinians the post-Oslo period has been marked by immense frustrations, anger and boredom. People are trying to appreciate the ordinary in a complex settler colonial reality that is marked by excessive violence, stress and uncertainty. But it is hard. Poverty is rising, unemployment rates are high and Israel still has the upper hand. What Saida is referring to is the direct consequence of the Oslo Accords. Within the Accords the Palestinian Liberation Organisation agreed with Israel to divide the Palestinian territory into three different zones (Clarno, 2017, 37-39). The Palestinian Authority was granted partial autonomy in the A and B Zones while Israel retained full jurisdiction over the C Zones – about 60% of the West Bank. Hebron is surrounded by territory marked as Area C. Saida told me the story about her cousin. A couple of months ago he started building a house for his family, just outside of Hebron. It was built upon territory marked as Area C. The Israeli government waited for him to finish the house to eventually destroy it completely. The population in Hebron is growing, but the division of their city and the partition of the Palestinian territory in these zones has made it impossible to facilitate demographic growth and expansion (Serry, 2017).

7. The Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights in Hebron

7.1. "The change that happened to the women in Hebron was in the way they dress.."

The first narrative aims to show the centrality of women's rights and women's bodies within the interviews I conducted in Hebron. Throughout the interviews women's bodies were very easily centralised when the conservative character of Hebron was discussed. As if women's bodies represented the development of a city. Women's bodies have been centralised frequently and easily, not only among young Palestinians in Hebron – within state policies and projects, religion and human rights discourses.

But where does this centrality of women's bodies actually come from? Kandiyoti (1991) and Ilkkaracan (2002) pinpoint the process of modernisation forced upon the Middle East as a turning point. For the past two centuries Middle Eastern countries have been confronted with radical political, economic and social changes under the pressure of the West. Despite the diversity among Middle Eastern countries in the treatment socially, culturally and legally of women and women's rights, women have continued to be centralised in debates about modernising changes and reforms. The family needed to assure modernity. State policies and practices focused on improving women's rights or on showing compatibility of Islam and modernisation (Kandiyoti, 1991, 9-14). The family, where women have a central position, was pinpointed as the cornerstone of a society. Which seemed especially relevant in Hebron. This is where it is essential to understand the exceptional character of Hebron. Hebron is characterised by a strong social network built up around

firm family lines. Extended families remain among the most significant social forms in Hebron, alongside religious authorities (Abu-Lughod, 2013, 169-170). Al-Sakka (2017) confirms how family relations and religion are just as important for a younger generation of Palestinians today as for an older generation. However, women have always had a particular place within Palestinian families and Islam. The commitment to the latter can explain parts of a woman's place in a Muslim family. Women are believed to be entitled to a certain house of their own once they are married (Harker, 2012). It is enwritten in Sharia Law, as Marwan told me. Marwan was among the most committed Muslims I met in Hebron. For him, marriage was the only possible relation between a woman and a man.

But the centrality of women in the Hebron goes beyond Sharia Law. I explained a little bit about the First Intifada already, how it mobilised the Palestinian society as a whole. But the First Intifada could be understood as an important turning point in the positionality and centrality of women in a Palestinian society as well (Harker, 2012). When the First Intifada erupted women were fighting alongside their men. The existing roles and spaces, particularly the space of home, enlarged for women as they stepped into the protests. However, according to the interviews, Hebron took a very different turn after the First Intifada. *"The impact of religion and strict communities during the First Intifada. The Islamic movements started to influence the people by promoting this idea that we have been too far away from religion. You know, when people are depressed these ideas can easily convince them."* Ali told me. Saida confirmed this. It was Ali who started talking about his parents, about women and their dress during the seventies. *"I used to joke with my father, if we saw her pictures. Did you agree to marry her?"* Women were wearing skirts and tops. *"Hebron in the seventies was like Paris."* Idris replied to me when I asked about Hebron's conservative character. Once the First Intifada had passed, Hebron folded back on their religion. Mosques filled up with people for prayers, religious programs were broadcasted and people committed to Islam. Women's dress was centralised in religious programs and prayers as the veiled woman would represent Hebron's return to religion. Today, religion is still a very significant social form, but *"...it is not as big as it was during the Second Intifada and before 2010 even. People have put religion on the side in a lot of cases. Religion was only practiced during prayers in the mosque and at home. In their daily lives they are not using religion anymore."* Religion might be less constitutive as before, but still, all young Palestinians I interviewed described themselves as religious. People continue to practice Islam, it is still present but less extracurricular. However, the focus on women's dress continued. As Anuar continued about Hebron's development: *"It changed really quickly. From 2005 to 2010 there were big changes that could never happen that fast in other countries on all different subjects. The culture, the mentality of the people. People are less conservative today. Until 2002 young girls and women couldn't go onto the streets without wearing their headscarf. When other people outside of Hebron, came here, they used to leave their women at home."*

The exceptional and conservative character that Hebron entails does help us to understand where the focus on women comes from. The process of socialisation young Palestinians have gone through is fundamentally different than the process of socialisation for young Palestinians in other cities (Hilal, 2017). In Hebron *"...everybody is connected"* and *"the money in the city and the focus on trade is making people like this..."*. The fact that Hebron is known as the economic centre of Palestine where a strong social network persists, supports the first narrative but introduces the last narrative as well, the narrative that evolves around social pressure. Social pressure that stems from

the fact that everybody knows everybody and that money and trade are centralised in people's affairs. The same social pressure that is built upon traditions. And as tradition consolidates the nuclear family, women are perceived as vital to assure reproduction. The fact that Hebron is considered more traditional explains why gender is more present in the process of socialisation. It does not only limit the moving space of women, it centralises women in people's interaction as well. Judgements are made based upon the way women are dressing.

Hebron's deep history has, on top of social pressure, intensified the burden on women within their families. Especially, for the families living in Area H2. Women, as mentioned above, already have a very centralised position inside Palestinian families (Harker, 2012). Women rather than men are the ones making the important decision that evolve around the children, the larger family purchases and the visits to friends or family (Dhafer, Mikolajczyk, Maxwell & Krämer, 2010). Ever since Israeli settlers have settled themselves in the heart of the city, in 1968, with the approval of the Israeli government, Palestinian women were put under even more pressure. Israeli settlements have been built closer and closer to Palestinian houses forcing Palestinian families to live alongside the most fundamentalist settlers in the Palestinian West Bank. Young Palestinians have been raised by their mothers in these immensely intense situations. Above all, economic prosperity in Area H2 has only declined over the years (B'tselem, 2019). Among the young Palestinians I talked to, during the interviews and during the Humans of Hebron-project, the essential difference between Area H1 and Area H2 was mentioned several times. And again, women's rights, equality and freedom were associated with it. It is true however, that Palestinian women who are still living in Area H2 are more likely to be under extreme stress and fear than Palestinian women who are living in Area H1. It is not as easy to take care of your children, your family or your social network while an attack is always possible. As Selma told me, people can't even visit their house: *"Nobody visited us, until now. Maybe one or two aunts. That's it. My grandmother doesn't visit us. Nobody. My uncles only come after Ramadan. That is all..."*. And sometimes, it is even impossible to leave their own house.

The intensity of the situation for families living in Area H2 has drawn human rights organisations to Hebron. However, the human rights discourse only enforces a centrality of women and women's rights (Hodgson, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2013). The fact that the human rights discourse has institutionalised and consolidated women's rights extended the focus on women. As Palestinian societies, including Hebron, were flooding with human rights organisations and activists after the First Intifada, their discourse can be believed to be influential. As Allen (2011) shows in her book and as I discussed above. The centralisation of women in the interviews among young Palestinians could be understood as an unconscious reproduction of this Western discourse. The human rights discourse' focus on women and the fact that the discourse has been built upon a Western perspective that tends to reproduce gendered orientalist thoughts can explain what Marwan and Anuar say. *"The change that happened to the women in Hebron was in the way they dress, not the way of living."* Marwan explained this change as a reproduction of a Western discourse that was unfit for a Muslim society as Hebron. As all focus was on the way women were dressing and not on the way women were actually treated. So eventually not much changed. Anuar explained this change as an encounter with more Western norms and values as he compared Hebron to Jaffa. Jaffa is an old Palestinian city located in Israel. Young Palestinians who have grown up in Jaffa have encountered different, more Western, ways of living. *"In Jaffa, for example, Palestinian people who live there they took a lot of the Western culture. You will see a religious family, while the*

daughter is not. She is not wearing a scarf, she's wearing a bikini. Palestinian and Israeli in Jaffa share the same streets, same schools, same places. But we don't see them here. We are not affected culturally by this." Anuar reproduces gendered orientalist accounts that emphasise the veiled woman to be more religious than the woman who is wearing a bikini. As if an unveiled woman cannot be committed to Islam. The Western centralisation of women's bodies and dress, present in the human rights discourse, was reproduced by Anuar yet criticised by Marwan.

Before I turn to the second narrative it seems necessary to emphasise what Kandiyoti concluded in her research (Kandiyoti, 1991, 16-18). Women's bodies are in fact centralised within religious accounts, within the human rights discourse and within families but we can't forget women are active actors as well. The first narrative may centralise women but it underestimates the agency of women. All Palestinian women do interact with these narratives. As Saida, Deena, and Selma did during our interviews. These young women emphasised perspective when talking about women's rights, equality and freedom in Hebron. Women's bodies and dress were centralised in a similar ways, but Saida, Deena, and Selma managed to contextualise more.

7.2. "Now you are dealing with an educated woman."

The second narrative evolves around education and the way education has been centralised as a solution to overcome 'backwardness', to ensure emancipation and women's freedom and equality for quite some time already (Abu-Lughod, 2009). The educational discourse can be understood as a segment of a more overreaching discourse: the developmentalist discourse (Robinson-Pant, 2001). Within this discourse, ethnocentric and destructive colonial ideas are reproduced. Non-Western people are denoted as 'others' embodying every negative thing Western people aren't. It the Orientalist perspective I discussed before. The idea is that non-Western societies should follow the linear process of development Western societies went through. Within this process education is centralised as one of the most important tools to facilitate.

The educational developmentalist discourse seemed so distanced from a society as Hebron, but when I started analysing the interviews I encountered different accounts of the same discourse. Almost every interview mentioned, at least once; the education-attendance or success rates of young women in Hebron as a measurement women's rights, equality and freedom. It is true however, that over the years, the number of young Palestinian women attending higher education in Palestine has been rising. Today, the number of female students even exceeds the number of male students (PCBS, 2017).

When the focus of the interviews shifted to gender-equality in Hebron similar trends were mentioned. Idris and I were talking about Hebron's conservative character and how this is considered to be a difficulty for some when he mentioned the following: *"Now it has changed again. Even for the girls. Their family would have prevented them to go to university, the most important thing was to marry. Now, seventy percent of the university students are girls."* Even though, the percentage Idris refers to could not be double checked, it shows the tendency circulating in Hebron's society. Saida referred to similar percentages when I interviewed her: *"Women started going to university more, way more. The university where I go to about eighty percent of the students are women."* It is actually as Abu-Lughod (2010) stated it when she first wrote about the 'Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights'. The fact that the improvement in Muslim women's rights is

explained without any reference to women's rights, rather by referring to women's education. These percentages are used to explain gender relations and show improving gender-equality but cover real gender-issue in Hebron's society. They push away issues of gender inequality, as if they no longer pose an urgent problem. According to the human development discourse young girls and women who enjoyed education are able to make their own decisions. Individual capabilities are believed to be assured, women's rights are believed to be protected (Ringrose, 2007). Individual responsibility is passed on to women themselves. As Saida says: *"Women have to be more aware. There need to be more lectures about women's rights and organisations that can help women that face any problem."* So the choice to attend university is believed to be a straightforward one, one that every young Muslim woman makes without a doubt, because it will help her face any problem.

The human developmentalist discourse actually isolates the above percentages. It is unclear how women's university-attendance rates actually relate to men's university-attendance rates or why young women actually chose to attend university or don't. These percentages don't tell anything about how these young girls and women are educated. Still, access to education is believed to increase the human capabilities of Muslim women. With the right education women are believed to make 'the right choices'. Anuar and Idris, two men in their early thirties, who both missed out on higher education talked about women's education in a very similar way. They didn't know each other, but both mentioned the value of an educated wife:

"Now, you will deal with educated women. When you don't read or write as a parents who will teach the children. It is more easy now, if your women is educated. You can communicate with her, you can talk about anything you want. But if you get a women without education, you cannot talk about big topics then. Marrying an educated women means that you can talk to her. So it is good for you, but for your family as well. She takes care of your family, so if she is educated, she can educated your children as well."

"When a women is educated, she is able to form her own personality. Not independent. But before this did not exist. Now there is more freedom for women."

Education is essentialised as if women who miss out on education will not be able to be themselves (Adely, 2009). Uneducated women are devalued, while the tendency to devalue uneducated men was less prevalent. This Western perspective on the education of women has its roots in a modernizing discourse that is more than a century old. It is called 'marrying up'. Young women who wanted to marry young educated man tended to get education themselves. Tied to the belief that an educated man needed an educated woman as mother of his children and to maintain the household. Both Anuar and Idris did describe their lack of education as a loss, but never described it as affecting their sense of self. The Arab Human Development Report, which I will refer to again later, reproduces similar senses. Non-schooled Bedouin girls were described as follows: *"They are unable to read or write and thus express themselves – and have never heard of their human rights. This erodes their very human status"* (Abu-Lughod, 2009, 88). The educational discourse ignores the knowledge of educated and non-educated Muslim women completely. And what about the knowledge about their families, their society and religion? And their strength? It is this strength, stemming from their traditional role in a Palestinian society, that centralised women during the First Intifada, for example. To this extent the educational discourse falls into these gender-only and gender binary conceptions of educational achievements and access (Ringrose, 2007). These are

very easily recruited by an individualist neoliberal developmentalist discourse that fails to recognise the impact of growing up in a society as Hebron. The immense complex settler colonial reality is ignored completely but the immense strength of women as well.

Educational achievements in Hebron need to be understood in relation to restricted freedom of movement, violence and poverty. They need to be understood in relation to the mental and physical barrier within the city, the barrier I discussed above. Saida mentioned the same barrier: *"In H1 the people are more educated, just because it is easier to go to the university. They don't face as much problems going to school. I don't say life is perfect in H1, no way. The people here are fighting all the time."* Education-attendance rates do not show these restrictions or choices young women are confronted with. Deena, for example, actually wanted to go study in Bethlehem but couldn't because of intensified tensions during the Knife Intifada (2014-2015)¹. Her parents didn't want her to travel in between different cities because it was too dangerous. So eventually Deena went to Birzeit University in Ramallah. She will be one of the young women appearing in the education-attendance rates, but it will not be mentioned that her initial access to education was limited because of the settler colonial reality she is living in as a woman.

It is not to devalue education in the process of socialisation of young Palestinians. Deena, Saida and Selma emphasised how happy they were with their education, while Idris and Anuar really regretted lacking education. Education is valuable, but it just seems very important to nuance the overall idea of education as solution for backwardness. It departs from a Western perspective that is very problematic to start with and it ignores the range of possibilities for Muslim women in Hebron.

The Arab Human Development Report actually shows how the educational discourse is internalised by Middle Eastern countries as well. And therefor, might explain the reproduction of the discourse in the interviews. In 2005 the fourth Arab Human Development (AHD) Report was published with the support of United Nations Development Program. The 2005 AHD Report aimed to emphasis the human development in the Middle East as separate and unique in comparison to the earlier published UN Reports (Adely, 2009). However, both Adely (2009) and Abu-Lughod (2009) emphasis how the Report failed to do so. It reproduces the secular-liberal human development discourse internalised by Western societies, the same discourse that is found in all other UN Reports. The human development discourse, different than the human rights discourse, describes human capabilities as essential for people to be able to live their lives freely. The discourse is not pinpointed on human rights but on freedom and possibilities of choices (Adely, 2009). Abu-Lughod amplifies this point emphasising how women's rights actually have become the main instrument within this human development discourse. Women's rights are used to strengthen the belief and the necessity of 'good Western interest' and interventions in the Middle East. The report was supposed to be directed to the Middle East, the Arab region and their civil societies but it only answered Western agendas (Abu-Lughod, 2009). However, both agree that the human development discourse, and the AHD Report to extent, fail to encompass larger structural barriers

¹ From September 2015 until June 2016 an increased number of individual stabbing incidents happened in the Palestinian West Bank. Young Palestinians attacked, mostly Israeli citizens, as a way of protest. The course of events is referred to as the Knife Intifada or Stabbing Intifada known for the high number of uncoordinated, following, stabbing attacks (Beaumont, 2016).

and power dynamics that constrain the actual individual capabilities of both women and men (Adely, 2009). The report has been written into the politically charged and historical particular context of Western superiority. A context of global inequality and hostility. It dismisses the locality of women's issues and rights.

While trying to reassure Western superiority, education is centralised as the necessary basis for the emancipation of Muslim women. The educational discourse actually continues as education is believed to amplify Muslim women's chances of finding her way to a wage labour-market (Adely, 2009). The educational discourse seems very much related to what Boserup (1970) introduced in the 1970s. Her research centralised the role of women in process of economic development in non-Western societies. Boserup's general argument is that women are marginalised on the wage-labour-market because their economic gains are compared to those of male workers. Effort should be directed to address this issue.

Women need to have their share of the development of the wage labour-market (Boserup, 1970; Adely, 2009; Hasso, 2009). Because women who are working are believed to be liberated. Within the Arab Human Development Report similar thoughts were mentioned. As during the interviews. When I asked Selma to describe the current situation for women in Hebron she answered: *"Today, women are very strong. In the past, women were nothing but now a lot of women are working for themselves and for the society."* What Selma referred to is similar to what Adely (2009) mentioned in her critical analysis. The idea that stepping into a wage labour-market automatically assures women more power and more strength.

However, these ideas fail to encompass the possibility of young educated women choosing a life with their families (Hasso, 2009). It is not to say Selma does not encompass this possibility. It is to say that the human rights developmentalist discourse does not while it is this discourse that continues to be centralised when women's rights are discussed. This is where the problem lies. Arab families are still, too often, framed as an obstacle for the real development of women (Adely, 2009). This makes it difficult to envision Arab families in which parents are piling up debts to pay for university. Or parents who advise against marriage before graduation. It makes it impossible to understand the real dilemmas young Muslim women are facing. These dilemmas are the outcome of processes of socialisations and the society in which these women have been moving around.

It was during a more informal conversation with Aisha that I started to realise what these real dilemma's actually meant. I met Aisha through a mutual friend. We spend about two days together talking about a whole range of issues and topics. About Palestine, about Hebron, about her upcoming marriage and about our further futures. We were both university students at that time finishing the last parts of our masters. As we started talking about our futures Aisha started asking questions about women's position in the West. *"How do you do it? How do you have full time jobs and a family at the same time? There is so much to do at home. I don't understand."* Aisha was looking forward to getting married and starting her own family. She told me so much about her future husband. But she was also very proud to have been able to get a master's degree. She wanted to be able to do something with her degree, but maybe when her children would be a little older. When I told her about my sister, how she started working again after three months and took my little niece to childcare, Aisha responded uncomfortable. *"But why would I do that?"* These kinds of dilemma's where women are balancing between their families or wage labour actually pose

a threat to the human development and human rights discourse (Abu-Lughod, 2009; Adely, 2009). When a woman consciously decides to stay at home and take care of her family, she doesn't follow the linear process of development.

But most importantly, an Arab family does not have to be that assumed obstacle to women's rights, freedom or equality (Abu-Lughod 2009, Hasso, 2009). What I encountered in the interviews was the exact opposite. Selma, Deena and Saida referred to their families as extremely supportive. When women's issues and gender inequality was discussed during the interviews, each and every one of them made sure to distance these issues from their own families. Other women were confronted with more complex, and sometimes violent, family members that pressured them. *"I don't care actually. The most important thing is my family. My family is okay so I don't care about people, even though, it is sometimes very hard to hear these talks from people about the way you dress."* The value of family, that Selma mentioned, cannot be ignored (Hasso, 2009). As for many young girls and women the entitlements in their families are still very relevant. Or especially, within their close families. Which is what the last narrative will show as well. As Deena stated that she was very happy with her close relatives but did feel the pressure of family members who weren't as closely related to her. *"But my relatives and my family do still intervene in my life. I suffer from this. Some relatives even control the way I dress when I go visit them."*

When comparing the interviews with young women and the interview with young men similar tendencies appeared. It seems as if women's rights and equality do imply similar things for both of them. However, the women I interviewed tended to be more nuanced. Deena, Selma and Saida all corrected themselves when they started talking about women's rights in general terms. There were differences to be recognised. Differences between women who are living in the city and women who are living on the countryside, women who are living in Area H1 and women who are living in Area H2, women who enjoy education and women who don't. The educational discourse fails to encompass these differentiations (Abu-Lughod, 2009; Hasso, 2009). It reproduces a negative representation of subordinated Muslim women in the Middle East. It does not empower women. Rather, it neglects important parts of their reality. During the two months I spend in Hebron, I talked to different women, both in formal and informal settings. For the Humans of Hebron project I had several conversations with interesting women, who at some point started to talk about religion as well, especially when we were talking about Hebron. The educational discourse, built within the neoliberal secular framework of the West, still considers Islam to be non-compatible with women's rights or equality (Hasso, 2009). The fact that Islamic teachings actually do centralise education is completely ignored (Hamdan, 2006). In the Quran women are actually encouraged to participate in all public spheres. However, the problem lies with the rigid interpretations of the Quran, rendered by men, that actually do limit women's participation and equality. Cultural traditions, more often than not, contradict the Quran's teaching to women. Deena, Selma and Saida were very aware of the contradictions between Islamic teachings to women and cultural traditional values. For them, it wasn't their religion that pressured them, it was tradition. When we talked about the hijab and the conservative character of Hebron as a city, Saida mentioned the following: *"It is was a tradition thing. You couldn't see women without a hijab, even though they didn't really believe in it. I know a lot of women who don't wear their hijab in another city or another country. It is more as a tradition of Hebron, so they feel they don't need to wear it when they are outside of Hebron. Because that is how they were raised, that is why so many people took off their hijab nowadays."*

What the critical analysis of both Abu-Lughod (2009) and Adely (2009) show is the entanglement of these Western discourses with the policies and practices in the Middle East. Western discourses that fail to consider the relevance of localities. Again, the Middle East is considered to be coherent region that should be assisted in their development (Hasso, 2009). Education is centralised as the one solution that will ensure female empowerment. *“People need to be more educated about women’s rights.”*

“If we would have more education here, we would have less problems as well. It is so hard to deal with ignorance. If people would be more educated and people read more about everything, they would know how to behave behind closed doors.” (Anuar, 24th of January, Hebron)

7.3. “There are things you would want to do but you don’t do it because of the traditions here.”

I mentioned the last narrative briefly already. It centralises one of the exceptional characters of Hebron, its social network and the social pressure and judgment entangled within it. It was during my first interview with Anuar that I started to realise how Hebron’s strong social network was not as strongly founded as I thought in the first place. Anuar and I were discussing different topics related to women’s rights, equality and freedom when the whole idea of marriage was mentioned. Anuar started to talk about his own marriage, about his beautiful wife and his children. Despite being happily married, he felt pressured, he felt like he wasn’t living his life for himself. As a young hairdresser, married with two kids, Anuar felt constraint by traditional gender roles entangled in Hebron’s society. He never got the opportunity to finish his education. As one of the oldest sons in his family Anuar carried responsibility to maintain his relatives. Once he left high school, he needed to start working and saving up some money to be able to marry one day soon. Once he was married, responsibility shifted to his own family. Anuar explained: *“In Hebron, for example, there are things you would want to do but you don’t do it because of the traditions here. For the past five years, I haven’t done anything for myself. I do things for my family, not for myself.”*

Anuar was not the only one who mentioned this intense social pressure. When I started talking about equality between men and women in Hebron with Selma, she mentioned how families have become more and more protective of their children, and especially over their daughter to shield them from judgment as much as possible. People are judging each other on the way they dress, the way they act and what they own. *“They don’t judge you based on your heart.”* Ali described Hebron as a city where *“...people know each other, which is a good and bad thing at the same time. But we do need a social change. This is a very huge problem within our city. We need to respect each other more, to get rid of this idea that men can do what every they want. Stop judging women. Stop judging men as well.”*

Social pressure is not a women’s only issue, but it does affect the way young Palestinians are talking about women’s rights. To understand this narrative that centralises social pressure, we need to understand where the social pressure actually comes from. This is where the exceptionality of Hebron, which I discussed earlier, comes in. Since the Oslo Accords passed, the economic stability in Palestine only declined (Kelly, 2008). Ever since the Palestinian Authority was created in 1994, individualist accounts found their way into Palestinians societies as the Palestinian Authority

pinpointed a range of neoliberal policies (Hilal, 2015). With the support of Western states, and under the pressure of Israel, the Palestinian Authority created pseudo-state institutions with a rigid hierarchical structure and privileges. New job opportunities were created in ministries, services, security agencies, etc. employing a significant part of the Palestinian society with the Palestinian Authority. Focus shifted to economic prosperity and personal gains, especially in a city as Hebron, where economic activities have always taken on a very central position. As Anuar told me: *“In general, after the Second Intifada, the money has been controlling our lives here more. We do have a strong-connected social life in Hebron, but a lot of people judge each other on the basis of money today. How much money do you have? Do you work?”*

This neoliberal shift happened while young Palestinians I interviewed were growing up. It defined part of their process of socialisation. Throughout the interviews I tried to understand what growing up in a society as Hebron meant for young Palestinians, to understand the way young Palestinians were talking about women’s rights, equality and freedom. Therefore, I needed to understand where these young Palestinians are actually coming from and why they do value this particular social pressure. Previous research conducted at the Birzeit University together with the Centre for Development Studies and the American Friends Service Committee, published in 2017, explains what influenced the process of socialisation and construction of identity for young Palestinians. Therefore, I want to include it when introducing the narrative on social pressure.

The fact is that the identity of young Palestinians has been constructed in a dynamic and social process of interactions – interactions between individuals, between communities and localities, but also between the local and the global (Al-Sakka, 2017; Habashi, 2017). To understand youth’s identity we need to understand this process of interactions within Hebron’s settler colonial reality. The local discourse, for many Palestinians, is built up around the interaction between family and community (Habashi, 2017, 39-49). Community relations, even though underestimated within the Western literature, are still very influential in the political socialisation of Palestinian youth.

Whereas the political agency of youth is contextualised in these community relations and interactions that are extended in family dynamics (Nguyen-Gillham, Glacaman, Naser & Boyce, 2006; Habashi, 2017, 39-49). The relevance of community and family relations is what I aimed to explain by referring to Hebron’s Hand above. The strong community relations reflect itself in an emotional sentiment towards Hebron and its community. Despite the frustrations about social judgements and pressure, the solidarity among Palestinians in Hebron prevails. All interviews mentioned the social pressure but ended our interview with a positive note on Hebron, on their society. Within this society, the family is the mirror of the community. I realised this is what Saida explained to me when I asked what actually changed in Hebron, for young girls and women: *“...if her family is more conservative they will let her study abroad, but they will send her brother or mother with her. They stick to the traditions, but they’re doing what their daughter wants as well. They want to respect the traditions in Hebron, so they send her brother with her.”*

Another important part of these community relations and interactions is the Palestinian national identity (Al-Sakka, 2017). The national identity that has strengthened in the national liberation struggle against the Israeli settler colonial project, that is intermingled with an Arab identity and Islam that appear strong in the hierarchy of collective Palestinian identities. For young Palestinians,

today, it is about holding on to this national, Arab and religious identity despite the segregation of the Palestinian territories since the Oslo Accords.

Ali, Saida, Idris, Deena and Marwan all repeated the same thing. *“At the end, we are all Palestinians.”* The collective identity of Palestinians still manages to bridge the segregation of the Palestinian territories, but young Palestinians do value local identities first. Al-Sakka (2017) emphasises how local identities are translated in adherence to traditional social institutions. The Palestinian society is still based upon patriarchal structures and young Palestinians do still value those traditional outcomes highly. This adherence to traditional social institutions was very particular in Hebron. Saida told me about how Islam was very much centralise during her childhood. After the First Intifada Islamic sheiks presented themselves in the public debates as I briefly discussed in the first narrative (Roy, 2003). The people in Hebron needed to return to Islam. Throughout the 1990s Islamic movements, including Hamas, tried to integrate themselves in public spaces through providence of much-needed services. The First Intifada had marked the Palestinian society as a whole. The society needed to rebuild itself. Through these services Islamic movements gained credibility. For about twenty years Islamic movements managed to centralise themselves in the lives of many Palestinians. As Saida confirmed about Hebron’s society. Mosques were more strict about Islam, people knew what religion was about, religion was even broadcasted on television. But over time, Islamic sheiks and their Islamic movements, lost credibility. Saida pinpointed the Arab Spring that erupted in 2011 as turning point. *“The last ten years, with the Arab Spring and the revolutions, we know the facts about the sheiks. They are only political, they don’t care about the people from their country, only about their president and the government.”* But Saida continued: *“I always felt like I wanted to be a good Muslim.”*

What Saida explained to me actually corresponds to what Al-Sakka (2017) tried to explain in his research about young Palestinians and their identity. According to his research religion does still determine a great part of the identity of young Palestinians. In the same way a secular person submits to certain norms and values, young Muslims submit to Islamic norms and values as well (Mahmood, 2001). By following these norms they turn themselves into something they want to be. For young Palestinian women, it can be through the act of veiling themselves. As Saida explained to me: *“...it was my own decision completely. To be honest, I start wearing the hijab at a young age. I was thirteen years old. It is really young, but it was my decision. My parents were like warning me that I was too young, saying that I just wanted a change in my life and that praying was what really mattered. At that time, I was not praying actually, so they told me that I needed to pray if I would wear the hijab. And I’m completely convinced.”* So I asked Saida what convinced her to start wearing the hijab at such a young age: *“I really love reading. One of the things I like to read about are the prophets, the stories of the Quran [...] Even though, I was really lazy in praying, to be honest. I was like, this is something that everybody can see. I was not that mature at that time. I just thought I was religious and I want to show it. But after wearing the hijab and praying more, I felt closer to my religion and this is what I wanted.”*

Young Palestinians do still care about their religion, about their community and family, as I stated before. Therefore, it can be assumed that the social pressure entangled in Hebron’s society does affect young Palestinians. To some extent, it also affects their narrative about women’s rights in Hebron. Young Palestinians think about women’s rights in a different way, because it encompasses different rights and freedoms. The act of veiling, Saida was talking about, is a very useful example

to show the importance of religion and the different meanings of concepts as women's rights, freedom and equality. Too often, the veil is assumed to be a political symbol, while for many Palestinian women it is part of their identity as young Muslims (Mahmood, 2001). The idea of Muslim women choosing consciously to cover themselves is rendered impossible as Islam is perceived as the defined obstacle for real gender equality. Islam does define important parts of Muslim women's lives, but it does not automatically subordinate women.

According to the Western perspective a Muslim woman who chooses to veil herself or to wear the full Islamic dress embraces 'subordinating values' (Mahmood, 2001). From their perspective, however, they are not. Islam is not the definable for the suppression of Muslim women. Islam interacts with the society in which it is practiced, it is interacted with and understood in so many different ways. Also in ways that centralises women. Rather traditions define gender roles. Among the young Palestinians I interviewed in Hebron religion was never mentioned as definable for the inequality between women and men. Deena, Selma and Saida all valued their commitment to Islam. Anwar emphasised how Islam was not responsible for women's lacking rights. *"For you it all seems as limitations, but for us it is different."* Rather, the intense social pressure based upon traditions limited a possible shift to equality between men and women. *"Everyone is connected here, and people here consider the shame more important than the things that are prohibited by Islam. This city is completely different from other Palestinian cities. But it develops."*

Eventually, the difference between tradition and religion is not strict (Abu-Lughod, 2013, 70-75). It is intermingled and it develops over time. As Saida explained, after the First Intifada, Islam was more centralised in the public debates and interactions. So at that point, religion became a ground of judgment. But today, religion has moved back into the private sphere. Most Palestinian women do still veil themselves in Hebron, as religion is still essential for many Palestinians, but it is not a ground of judgment anymore. Saida explained this development as followed. *"I think Hebron is the city where most people wear the hijab. It is more a tradition, than it is about religion. Now, it is less. As I told you, people by time have become more open-minded. If you want to wear a hijab, you can wear it but if you don't want to wear it, you just don't."*

"It is was a tradition thing. You couldn't see women without a hijab, even though they didn't really believe in it. I know a lot of women who don't wear their hijab in another city or another country. It is more as a tradition of Hebron, so they feel they don't need to wear it when they are outside of Hebron. Because that is how they were raised, that is why so many people took off their hijab nowadays."

The last narrative shows how 'the Social Life of Muslim Women's Rights in Hebron' is entangled in the way people are interacting with each other. The pressure young women feel when entering Hebron's society defines their judgment on women's rights, freedom and equality. We need to put aside the Western perspective on women's rights. The way women and men interact with each other and with their society is fundamentally different in each and every society. Even inside of Palestine.

8. Conclusion

The three narratives I used to describe the way young Palestinians talk about and engage with women's rights are entangled with a Western perspective, Hebron's exceptional character and the complex settler colonial reality the young Palestinians grew up in.

The first two narratives show an entanglement of Western perspectives internalised in the human rights discourse. Within the first narratives young Palestinians, both men and women, reproduced a centrality of women's bodies and women's dress that seems to stem from the gendered orientalist perspective I discussed (Abu-Lughod, 2010, 2-3). Women's bodies and women's dress, especially of Muslim women, is believed to represent the real character of a society. The second narrative, in a similar way, shows how the educational discourse focuses on women (Adely, 2009; Hasso, 2009; Abu-Lughod, 2009). As if education percentages tell us everything about women's rights in Palestine. The entanglement, and to a certain extent reproduction, of these Western perspectives can be understood as a consequence of the development of the human rights discourse. The impact of the human rights discourse in a Palestinian society as Hebron cannot be underestimated (Allen, 2013, 12-13). However, I can't underestimate my own positionality either. As a young white woman my presence can be easily associated with more Western perspectives. It might be that the young Palestinians I interviewed were more likely to involve a discussion on women's rights in a conversation with me.

The exceptionality of Hebron, secondly, was found in all three narratives. The first narratives emphasis the centrality of women that stems from Hebron's traditional-conservative character in which the family is essential (Harker, 2012; Abu-Lughod, 2013, 169-170). As women have always occupied an exceptional place in Muslim families, their exceptionality seems to be reproduced when women's rights are discussed. The second narrative shows how essential education is believed to be when women's rights are part of the conversation, as if education is the solution for everything (Adely, 2009; Hasso, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 2009). This narrative resonates with Hebron's economic character. Education is believed to assure access to a wage-labour market that has become more important in Hebron's society since the neoliberal policies and reforms initiated by the Palestinian Authority. The last narrative centres completely around Hebron's society and its particularities. The social pressure young Palestinians are confronted with seems very much connected to Hebron's development as a society. It is connected to close community- and family-relations (Al-Sakka, 2017). Everybody knows everybody and everybody tries to help everybody they know. But it is connected to the intensified distance that has been evolving since the city as divided into Area H1 and Area H2 as well.

All three narratives show the relevance of an analysis that focusses on Hebron. As the social reality in which the young Palestinians I interviewed grew up is complex. The focus on the process of socialisation of these young Palestinians was therefore valuable and necessary to make Abu-Lughod's concept applicable in Hebron's society. While Abu-Lughod (2010) focused on a Palestinian society, more in general, I wanted to focus on Hebron as a particular Palestinian society. A society that needs to be differentiated from others. Within Palestine there are fundamental differences in the way women's rights are understood, practiced and discussed. Abu-Lughod's analysis of Palestinian women's rights was valuable as basis of my own analysis but needed to be broadened to understand the exceptional and conceptual character of Hebron.

This thesis aimed to show the exceptional and conceptual character of Hebron in relation to how young Palestinians narrate women's rights. The interpretative analysis I made is contemporary. But in ten years, a new generation of young Palestinians might be confronted with a whole different range of issues. Hebron might have folded back on their religious basis or might turn the other way around. My analysis is not conclusive but valuable. It helps understand the process of socialisation young Palestinians, today, went through. It highlights the things young Palestinian men and women have encountered during their childhood and how it impacted the way they are talking about their society and women's rights within their society today. I aim to encourage further research that stems for a similar focus on Hebron and its youth.

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