Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal for Cultural Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcuv20

Hair cutting as resistance: Gazan women and the failures of global feminism

Bilal Hamamra, Noor Alzaghal, Ayman Mleitat & Guido Veronese

To cite this article: Bilal Hamamra, Noor Alzaghal, Ayman Mleitat & Guido Veronese (28 Nov 2024): Hair cutting as resistance: Gazan women and the failures of global feminism, Journal for Cultural Research, DOI: 10.1080/14797585.2024.2434835

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2024.2434835

JOURNAL FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2024.2434835

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Hair cutting as resistance: Gazan women and the failures of global feminism

Bilal Hamamra[a], Noor Alzaghal[a], Ayman Mleitat[a] and Guido Veronese[b]

[a]English, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine; [b]Department of Human Sciences for Education, University of Milano-Bicocca, Milano, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article employs socio-cultural theories to analyse the psycho-social effects of Gazan women cutting their hair during the 2023–2024 Gazacide. The severe conditions in Gaza, exacerbated by a lack of sanitation and essential resources due to the ongoing blockade, have forced women into extreme precarity. This has led to the compulsory act of hair-cutting as a measure for disease prevention. The act of cutting hair, which disrupts a universally recognised symbol of beauty and health, highlights the broader socio-political crisis. The paper critiques Western feminism for its selective empathy, noting its neglect of Gazan women's suffering while focusing on issues pertinent to Western contexts. By framing hair-cutting not as individual psychological distress but as a response to aggravated socio-political conditions, the article underscores how this act reflects the broader dehumanisation and suffering imposed by the ongoing genocide.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 September 2024
Accepted 23 November 2024

KEYWORDS
Gaza; genocide; water crisis; resistance; hair cutting; torture

Introduction

Different representations of hair – forced cutting as branding, activist performance, or survival strategy – should be categorised to distinguish their specific politics. Following World War II, the practice of shaving women's heads emerged as a punitive measure against those accused of collaboration or fraternisation with Nazi forces. Similarly, in France and the Netherlands, women perceived as too friendly with the occupying forces were subjected to head-shaving, branding them with the pejorative 'moffenmeid,' a stigma that visibly marked them as traitors (van der Donk, 1992, p. 108). Margaret Ward points out that in Ireland during the War of Independence (1919–1921), the act of hair cutting and shaving was employed as a form of punishment and control over women (2020). This period was marked by a violent struggle for Irish independence from British rule, characterised by guerrilla warfare, political unrest, and significant societal division. Women played varied roles in this conflict, including combatants, supporters, and victims of violence. The forcible removal of women's hair by both republican and loyalist forces within Ireland was more than an act of physical violence; it was symbolic. Hair, often seen as a marker of femininity and personal identity, when forcibly cut or shaved, served to

CONTACT Bilal Hamamra bilalhamamra@najah.edu English, An-Najah National University, PO. Box 7 Nablus, West Bank, Palestine

publicly shame and stigmatise women. This punishment was particularly aimed at those accused of fraternising with the enemy, be it British soldiers or members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), as well as those involved in activities deemed unpatriotic or betraying the nationalist cause. This practice reflected broader gendered dynamics and the use of women's bodies as battlegrounds for moral and political ideologies. In modern conflicts, similar tactics have been used, reflecting the continuing use of gendered violence in warfare. For instance, during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, reports have emerged of women cutting their own hair to make themselves less appealing to Russian soldiers, in a desperate attempt to avoid sexual violence. This act of self-modification underlines the grim reality of war's impact on women and highlights how the threat of gender-based violence can compel individuals to alter their appearances and erase markers of their gender identity to protect themselves (Hargrave, 2022).

The connection between hair cutting in WWII and Gaza can be understood through biopolitics and necropolitics (Foucault, 1978; Mbembe, 2003). In both contexts, women's hair becomes a site of power where external forces impose control. In WWII, the forced shaving of women's heads was a biopolitical strategy to brand and dehumanise them (Jankowski, 2007). In Gaza, hair cutting, although self-imposed, is a reaction to necropolitical control – the deprivation of basic resources like water – where women must adapt to survive under hostile conditions. In both instances, women's bodies are sites of political struggle, where control over hair represents a broader domination over their lives.

This paper examines the psychosocial effects of Gazan women engaging in the act of cutting their hair amidst the genocide in Gaza. In this paper, we have collected social media posts of Gazan women testimonies and news reports highlighting one aspect of Gazan women's struggle amidst the ongoing genocide/Gazacide. We collected testimonies regarding hair cutting/hair shaving and analysed it through a psycho-social transnational postcolonial feminist perspectives. Gazan women, already navigating a precarious existence due to patriarchal and colonial oppression, find themselves in an even more vulnerable position during the tumultuous events in Gaza. This vulnerability is particularly evident in the forced behaviour of hair cutting, stemming from a lack of access to basic hygiene facilities. This practice not only brings shame to the patriarchal structures of the Arab and Islamic societies, which are expected to safeguard these women, but also challenges Western feminist movements that selectively ignore the plights of Gazan women. Traditionally, a woman's hair is seen as a symbol of beauty and health, making the act of cutting it a significant psychosocial detriment, affecting their sexual, individual, and societal identity. Rather than interpreting this self-inflicted harm as merely a psychological issue rooted in personal struggles, our analysis focuses on the sociopolitical forces and exacerbated pathological states driving these women and their daughters to sacrifice their beauty by cutting their hair as a direct consequence of the escalating violence in the Israeli assault on Gaza, as well as, a way for resisting the weaponisation of femininity by the Israeli Occupation and reclaiming Gazan women's agency.

In Gaza, the influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals, half of them children, into Rafah has pushed the city's water supply and sanitation systems to a breaking point. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of power supply, fuel shortages, restricted access to humanitarian aid, and significant damage to infrastructure, with at least 50% of water and sanitation facilities being damaged or destroyed. UNICEF, in

a report issued on 19 December 2024, highlighted the dire situation, stating, 'Children in the Gaza Strip do not access 90 per cent of their normal water use'. It further noted that displaced children in the southern Gaza Strip are limited to merely 1.5 to 2 litres of water per day for survival. This amount is drastically lower than the essential minimum of 15 litres per person per day recommended for drinking, washing, and cooking, and the bare minimum of 3 litres needed for survival. Catherine Russell, the Executive Director of UNICEF, starkly emphasised the crisis, stating: 'Access to sufficient amounts of clean water is a matter of life and death. . .children in Gaza have barely a drop to drink. Children and their families are having to use water from unsafe sources that are highly salinated or polluted. Without safe water, many more children will die from deprivation and disease in the coming days' (2024, quoted in EFE, 20 December 2023). Furthermore, the report sheds light on the grim conditions in shelters, where long lines for toilets are common, with an average of one toilet for every 700 people. This scarcity forces many to use buckets or resort to open defaecation, and with even fewer options for showering, hygiene practices are severely compromised, especially for women and girls, further contributing to spreading of disease.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported on the cascading effects of the water crisis on healthcare access and public health, stating, 'Damaged water and sanitation systems, and dwindling cleaning supplies have made it almost impossible to maintain basic infection prevention and control measures' (2023). The consumption of polluted water has led to an increase in bacterial infections, such as diarrhoea, particularly among children under five. The crisis has also seen a sharp rise in dehydration cases and made it increasingly difficult to manage the outbreak of gastroenteritis. It is the scarcity of water in Gaza that has compelled women to resort to cutting their hair, a violent practice that has, as we will see, social, psychological and political significance. Reuters reports that in DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza, Aug 13 'When girls complain to Gaza paediatrician Lobna al-Azaiza that they have no comb, she tells them to cut off their hair' (Abed, 2024). Due to the lack of sanitary supplies such as shampoo and water, Dr Lobna Al-Azaiza instructs Gazan girls to cut their hair in order to avoid health complications and the spread of ringworms or lice as a result of the overcrowded refugee camps that lack basic hygiene necessities. Dr Al-Azaiza further elaborates saying that 'in the past period, the most common disease we have seen was skin rashes, skin diseases, which have many causes, including the overcrowding in the camps, the increased heat inside the tents, the sweating among children, and the lack of sufficient water for bathing' (Abed, 2024).

Significance of hair to psychological wellbeing and identity

The importance of hair to human identity and psychological well-being cannot be overstated. Scalp hair has long been considered an integral symbol of beauty and health, and losing one's hair carries profound psychological consequences for the individual and their surroundings. Thomas Cash posits that the psychological and social significance of human hair exceeds its biological functions, reflecting on the individual's identity and self-image (Cash, 2001). This shows that the significance of hair goes beyond mere physical appearance; it is deeply intertwined with how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. For instance, Sama Tubail, an 8-year-old Gazan girl, relates to AJ+ how the horrors of the genocidal

war on Gaza have caused her to lose her hair. She says while holding back tears, 'people keep asking me, do you have cancer? Are you bald? And I feel embarrassed not knowing what to answer them, so I stopped going out to play with the other kids' (2024). The overwhelming embarrassment experienced by this young girl displays the importance of maintaining beautiful hair for female's psychological wellbeing, as well as, for her social lives. Not only does losing hair negatively impact women's psychological wellbeing, but also the opposite situation is viable, wherein byproducts of the Gazacide (i.e. fear, stress, lack of water and shampoo etc.) also cause hair loss and hair damage. Therefore, this interrelated relationship between hair and psychological wellbeing is of interest to this paper. In addition to the severe impact of the ongoing war on Gaza people's economic and overall well-being, this article employs gender and age as key variables to explore how females in Gaza are psychosocially influenced as they are forced to cut their hair due to the strenuous conditions resulting from Israeli colonial violence. The lack of access to basic hygiene facilities compels these women to engage in this act, which carries significant psychological ramifications. This forced behaviour highlights the extreme vulnerability of women in conflict zones and underscores the dire conditions under which they live. Dhami concludes that the loss of hair at an early age leads to self-consciousness and a lack of confidence (Dhami, 2021). He adds that 'Women face increased societal pressure compared with men due to reduced cosmetic acceptance. Hence, baldness will affect them more negatively and worsen their life situation' (Dhami, 2021, p. 412). This highlights the gendered dimensions of hair loss, suggesting that the psychological impact is compounded for women by societal norms and expectations. Women are often judged more harshly for their appearance, and hair loss can be particularly devastating, affecting their self-esteem and social interactions.

When women resort to the psychologically harmful act of hair cutting, as seen in many videos emerging from Gaza, they inadvertently highlight the exceptional precariousness of their existence. The act of cutting hair, forced by circumstances beyond their control, symbolises a loss of control over personal identity and societal perceptions. This act is not just a personal or psychological response; it is a powerful statement about the sociopolitical conditions that compel such drastic measures. It exacerbates the psychosocial toll of the conflict, illustrating the profound and multifaceted impact of war on women's lives. Through this lens, the act of hair cutting becomes a symbol of resistance and resilience in the face of the Israeli military occupation and its ongoing genocide against Palestinians.

Cutting hair as a form of resistance has emerged as a powerful feminist symbol in Iran and beyond, representing defiance against patriarchal norms and oppressive regimes. This act serves as a reclamation of agency, illustrating women's refusal to conform to societal expectations surrounding femininity and appearance (Asadi Zeidabadi & Aghtaie, 2023). In the wake of Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022, protests erupted across Iran, with many women publicly cutting their hair to challenge the oppressive enforcement of hijab laws and to express their demand for freedom and equality (Khatam, 2023). Similarly, this form of resistance resonates globally, as seen in movements advocating for women's rights, where hair cutting symbolises a break from control and an assertion of identity. By embracing this radical act, women not only challenge existing power

structures but also forge solidarity across diverse contexts, highlighting the interconnectedness of feminist struggles worldwide.

Engaging with Muslim feminist writings, such as those by Saba Mahmood, as well as black feminist and decolonial perspectives on hair politics, can offer valuable insights into the intersections of identity, culture, and resistance. These frameworks highlight how hair serves as a site of struggle and expression for women across different contexts, particularly within feminist movements (Chaves & Bacharach, 2021).

Saba Mahmood's work emphasises the complexities of agency and autonomy within Muslim women's practices, challenging the notion that empowerment can only be understood through Western frameworks (Mahmood, 2004, 2013). Similarly, black feminist thought sheds light on how hair is tied to racial identity and resistance, showcasing the significance of hair as a political statement in the fight against systemic oppression (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020; Onnie Rogers et al., 2022). Additionally, exploring recent writings on women's movements related to hair – especially in the context of Iran (Kohan, 2022) – can reveal how hair politics play a crucial role in expressions of identity and resistance against authoritarian regimes. The ways in which women negotiate their hair – through acts of defiance or cultural expression – reflect broader struggles for autonomy and self-determination (Abdmolaei, 2013; Karaman & Christian, 2022). By incorporating these diverse perspectives, one can deepen the understanding of how hair functions not just as a personal or cultural marker, but also as a powerful symbol in the feminist discourse surrounding resistance, identity, and liberation across different cultural contexts.

However, we must be conscious not to romanticise the undeniable struggle of Palestinian women, especially in the context of an ongoing genocide (Achilli, 2015). The rhetoric on resilience of Palestinian society often obscures the harsh reality of annihilation and powerlessness amid the acute phase of extermination (Giacaman, 2020). Portraying Palestinian women as solely agentic and strong opponents of colonial ethnic cleansing risks becoming an orientalist reduction of their daily, painful struggle for survival – an ordeal that few could bear at such a magnitude (Said & Hitchens, 2001). Furthermore, overestimating women's agency in the face of mass violence can lead to a projection of white fragility and guilt, conjuring an image of a mythical woman-warrior rather than acknowledging the suffering individuals enduring an unbearable fight for survival (McKinley, 2023). The most troubling scenario is when white feminists, opposing hijab and indigenous patriarchal structures, engage in pinkwashing, deflecting responsibility from colonial powers that systematically undermine Palestinian women's agency and capacities.

In this context, we do not intend to pathologize or victimise women for the act of cutting their hair. Rather, this can be viewed as an agentic choice, where women actively respond to the hygienic and sanitary crises they face (Veronese et al., 2021). However, considering the systematic dehumanisation and coercion occurring during the Gaza genocide, this act may lose its empowering significance. Thus, we can describe it as a performative expression of unreflective or harmful agency (Veronese et al., 2022).

The necropolitics of colonial powers perpetuate biopolitical practices aimed at dominating, controlling, and ultimately erasing the bodies of the native populations. As Primo Levi noted regarding Auschwitz, the systematic humiliation of captives was a strategic method to reinforce their subhuman status, stripping them of agency through continuous

assaults on their bodily integrity (Castro, 2015). This included being stripped of their hair and clothing, sending a clear message of being reduced to 'human animals,' as the Israeli Minister of War described Palestinians in the aftermath of October 7th (Moses, 2024).

Therefore, while women may exercise a form of choice in altering their femininity through self-haircutting, the extensive and multifaceted nature of the dehumanising strategies in Gaza suggests that such acts may actually undermine their sense of identity. This degradation forces women into a position of inferiority, challenging their fundamental humanity.

At the individual level, hair cutting symbolises the loss of femininity and fosters a sense of humiliation and degradation both in front of the community and within the persons themselves. Losing control over their own body can instil feelings of powerlessness and public shame, particularly in front of men (Olujic, 1998). This dynamic reflects the broader process of dehumanisation, where dominated bodies are forced into transformation against their will (Levi, 1993). The loss of agency over one's own body and the expropriation of one's femininity create a profound sense of desperation and internal destruction (Barber et al., 2016). This psychological state increases vulnerability to further subjugation and, ultimately, elimination (Ephgrave, 2016).

The forced act of cutting hair serves as a powerful metaphor for the violation of personal autonomy and the stripping away of identity. It is not merely a physical alteration but a symbolic act of erasure that impacts the individual's sense of self-worth and dignity.

This public and private humiliation reinforces societal power structures, where women's bodies are controlled and manipulated as instruments of oppression. The trauma from such experiences and the resulting sense of subjugation can have lasting psychological effects, particularly when viewed as one of the multiple layers of biopolitical dynamics. This creates a pervasive sense of helplessness and reinforces the systemic nature of gendered violence. Furthermore, the communal aspect of this act cannot be overlooked. Women who are forced to cut their hair may face additional stigmatisation from their communities, exacerbating their isolation and psychological distress. The intersection of personal trauma and social ostracism creates a compounded burden, making recovery and resilience even more challenging. This act, therefore, is not only an individual tragedy but a reflection of the broader socio-political mechanisms that perpetuate gender inequality and violence.

Gender has been employed in Gaza to provoke national and religious reactions. Kringen and Novich consider hair as a personal code of agency and power, the loss of which conveys sociocultural and gender expression (Kringen & Novich, 2018). In response to the harrowing circumstances that have led women in Gaza to cut their hair for survival, Maqdoum demonstrates that 'Shaving of the heads of women is also a message of Shame to the Arab & Muslim World who became just spectators of a brutal war against innocent civilians, women, children, and old and injured people' (2024). This highlights the symbolic weight of women's hair loss, not merely as a personal loss but as a profound societal message, critiquing the passivity of the broader Arab and Muslim worlds in the face of the genocide in Gaza and its detrimental effects on women who, in broader terms, signify men's honour that is supposed to be protected and defended. Suad Joseph (1999) emphasises that patriarchal structures in Arab contexts are complex and negotiated,

often coexisting with strong communal ties that afford women varying degrees of agency. Gazan women's actions – cutting their hair out of necessity – can be seen as subverting traditional patriarchal expectations. Although patriarchal norms position men as protectors, Gazan women's survival strategies challenge these expectations, demonstrating their resilience and agency within a constrained socio-political framework.

Amid escalating health issues and the proliferation of lice among the displaced, compounded by water scarcity for regular bathing, many mothers have opted to cut their daughters' hair as well as their own. This measure, aimed at safeguarding them from health complications and diminishing lice infestation risks, has grown prevalent in shelters. While hair cutting as a lice remedy/prevention method should be paired with the application of lice-killing treatments and strategies to address other skin conditions, such treatments are not available in the refugee camps making the act of cutting their hair the only resort they have with the scarcity of water and self-care/hygiene products resulting from the Israeli imposed blockade on the Gaza strip. Despite the challenging nature of this decision – given that hair is traditionally viewed as a symbol of beauty for girls and women – the exigencies posed by the current conflict and health crises have rendered hair cutting an indispensable resource. In the Arab world, where women's long hair is a source of pride and a marker of beauty, reluctance to trim hair is common and often discouraged. However, the dire circumstances unleashed by the conflict in the Gaza Strip since October 7th have drastically altered lives, compelling women to cut their hair for maintenance and water conservation reasons. The necessity for shorter hair arises as its length and density demand considerable water for cleaning, a scarce resource following the disruption of water supplies to the Strip by the Israeli occupation and the scarcity of essential hair care products. Consequently, many have resorted to shortening not only their hair but also that of their daughters and sons, as a preventive measure against lice proliferation. Nisreen, a Palestinian mother of six, faced the harrowing decision to leave her home in Khan Younis on December 13th amid the escalating Israeli ground invasion. In an interview with Middle East Eye from her temporary shelter in the al-Mawasi area, the 49-year-old recounted the drastic measures she had to take due to the severe water scarcity. 'I had to shave my head, because I have no water to wash my hair'. Nisreen extended this heartbreaking decision to her family, shaving the heads of her 16-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son to protect them from scalp diseases, such as the scalp ringworm that had afflicted their friends. She remarked, 'Shaving our head is a painful decision for any woman, but we are forced to do it,' highlighting the desperation and the lengths to which families are going to cope with the dire conditions they face (Sabah, 2024). The ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip and targeted actions against water infrastructure have severely limited access to clean water, forcing families like Nisreen's to prioritise scarce water for survival over self-care, highlighting the profound impact of the conflict on basic human needs and health ("Gaza Women Resort to," 2024).

Pharaoh comments on the subsequent results of such actions on teenage girls saying that 'especially in children or teenagers in general, wherein adolescents already suffer from hormonal changes that lead to brain chemistry changes, any self-image distortion [like hair cutting/shaving] could lead to a psychological disorder or complex in the future' (2023, 3:37). It is thus inferred that the impact such actions have on young girls is alarming. An Instagram video documenting the horrid injuries of a young Gazan girl who arrived at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital due to the bombing in Al-Nusseirat area covered

in blood and ash further demonstrates the large impact of hair cutting/shaving for young Palestinian girls. The unnamed girl says to the camera 'My face burns, I feel that my hair has been plucked off. My hair used to be soft and beautiful, but look at how it has become!' (Mohamed Masri, 2024). In that state of utter shock after escaping a near death experience, this young girl is concerned and sad about the loss of her previously soft and beautiful hair. With her Hair covered in ash from the deadly bomb she escaped, she asks the doctor agonisingly 'Does that mean you will cut my hair? Look how my hair has become' (2024). Her loss of hair, on the one hand, is regarded intensely signifying the impact it has on her psychological wellbeing overshadowing the various other atrocities committed by the Israeli Occupation Forces as well as her blood-stained face. On the other hand, the little girl's fixation on her hair loss after going through such a traumatic experience could also be viewed as a coping mechanism, wherein she is actively focusing on hair loss in an attempt to manage her psychological trauma.

Bisan Owda, a young Gazan journalist that have been continuously documenting the various horrors and difficulties women face during the ongoing war, posted on her Instagram images of her holding her cut curls with the captions:

> I love my hair so much! I love the gorgeous curls on my head but I couldn't keep them! Today I cut a lot of my hair because it was damaged due to the lack of clean water and hair care products that I could not carry from my beautiful room! My wonderful hair, which I always tried to leave long and take care of and refused all chemical treatments to make it straight.it's ok. if I survived this, I will definitely get you back. (Dec 15, 2023)

> I am giving up my hair for the second time due to the lack of shampoo or any other product. I am surrounded by dust from the rubble of houses and the sandy environment in Al-Mawasi all day long, and I cannot keep my hair, which I love, healthy. I cut it off, despite my intense love for it. (Jul, 1, 2024)

As is the case with every woman, Owda regards her hair very dearly as a part of her identity. Psychological specialist, Mohanad Pharaoh relates how 'The physical appearance or outward beauty of women in general is an indication of identity assertion and self-esteem' (2023, 1:26), which clarifies the level of importance of hair for women as it situates them within the power relations of society depending on their self-perception and acceptance. Judith Butler's perspective on the body and power relations provides a theoretical framework to understand these choices of hair cutting/shaving as acts of agency and resistance. Butler (1990) points out that 'the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations' (p. 117). Women's hair thus is essential to their identity formation, and choosing what they want to do with their hair is a choice denoting subjectivity and agency. Choosing to cut their hair for survival is a subversive attempt to resist erasure both figuratively and literally. Owda also emphasises her intention of growing her hair back upon survival, which highlights her resilience. Pharaoh conveys that

> when a Gazan woman decides to cut her hair as an only resort in keeping up with her personal hygiene… This could have two indications. The first indication is linked to her current top priorities; cleanliness and survival… And the second indication… as a punishment for herself or as an expression of the anger she harbors. (2023, 1:37)

Therefore, Gazan women take on the action of cutting their hair as well as their Children's hair as an attempt for survival or as a reaction to the stress and trauma that accompanies

war or as an expression of anger towards themselves due to a perceived sense of incapacity/incompetence in helping themselves or their children, as well as, an expression of anger towards the Israeli Occupation's ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip and the ongoing ethnic cleansing Gazan's are experiencing for over a year. By choosing to cut their hair, Gazan women resist the Israeli Occupation's weaponisation of femininity; cutting/shaving their hair for survival under the current blockade of water and hygiene products defies the misogynistic notion that women must have long hair. Moreover, it highlights Gazan women's defiance of oppression.

The practice of cutting female hair in Gaza due to the lack of water is a poignant manifestation of the broader themes explored by Daher-Nashif and Shalhoub-Kevorkian in their study on sexual desire within the Israeli colonial apparatus. Daher-Nashif and Shalhoub-Kevorkian point out that 'The brutal juxtaposition between the sexually-oriented language of "ejaculation" of Palestinian women and the "elimination" of Palestinians through the aggression on Gaza reveals the correlation between colonised women's sexuality and physical safety, and the settler colonial project. The rape of the land, similar to the rape of women's bodies, has been at the forefront of the recent Israeli attacks aimed at the genocide of the Palestinian people, by annihilating their wombs' (Daher-N & Shalhoub-K, 2015, p. 140). The act of cutting female hair in Gaza, often as a result of water shortages, reflects the deeply gendered impact of colonial violence and resource deprivation. Women, already marginalised within the patriarchal structures of Palestinian society, bear a disproportionate burden of the consequences of the Israeli occupation. The act of cutting female hair can be understood within the framework of control and domination over Palestinian bodies. It symbolises not only the physical deprivation resulting from water scarcity but also the erosion of autonomy and dignity in the face of colonial oppression. The power imbalance between external and internal forces in a conflict setting often results in the redirection of aggression towards internally powerless groups, predominantly women. This extends to the ideology of colonial-sexual violence, which posits that the bodies of indigenous peoples, and by extension their lands, are inherently open to violation. Drawing parallels between the vulnerability of bodies and lands exposes the deep-rooted misogyny and racism that support colonial ideologies, authorising a broad range of violence against indigenous peoples and their habitats.

A woman's hair is not just a part of her external appearance; it plays a significant role in shaping her self-perception and social identity, intricately linked to her perceived attractiveness and femininity. This association has deep roots, as Harter (2000) points out, affecting a woman's self-image and her societal interactions. The importance of hair is ingrained in girls from a young age, teaching them to view it as a central element of their beauty and femininity (Weitz, 2004). For many women, the loss of hair, perhaps due to chemotherapy, is not just a physical alteration but a profound loss of self, highlighting the emotional and psychological impact of hair loss on women (Weitz, 2004). The act of head-shaving carries complex meanings beyond the mere removal of hair. Seigelshifer (2006) explores this act as a form of identity erasure, symbolising an individual's submission to a collective identity, such as that of soldiers, prisoners, or skinheads. This transformation can signify a relinquishing of personal autonomy and a merging into a collective ethos.

During the ongoing war on Gaza, Gazan women have endured various types of stress evoking difficulties and life-threatening conditions, as well as, an abundance of

torture techniques. 'The targeting of women in war is an integral war tactic, necessary for the destruction of communities, nations, and the masculinity of the enemy' (Philipose, 2007, p. 1058), which is evident in Ibrahim Shahin's testimony after being released from a 50-day detainment. Shahin comments on the torture Gazan women were subjected to saying that 'Palestinian women prisoners were subjected to the ugliest forms of injustice' (Barhoom, 2024). Shahin continues describing the torture saying that 'two of the detained women were passed in front of us naked, only in their underwear … [and] one of the detainees went to the investigation room with long hair and came out with her hair cut, with no hair' (Barhoom, 2024). Not only did the Israeli occupation forces strip and expose Gazan women in an act of humiliation, they also shaved their heads, further depriving them of their femininity. Moreover, forcing the Palestinian men to witness these acts is a type of psychological torture. For Arab Muslim men who value the modesty of the Muslim women, being forced to witness this abuse without having the ability to stop it causes them psychological stress. Shahin elaborates by asking 'do you know what it means to have to witness our women stripped in front of us with no respect whatsoever' (Barhoom, 2024).

Selective feminism impact on Gazan women's psychological wellbeing

In addition to breaking the silence of the Arab and Islamic worlds, the act of women cutting their hair in Gaza, as a response to the lack of water and sanitary supplies during the war, challenges the double standards of Western liberal feminism. This feminism often fails to acknowledge violence and sexual equality as core principles. Moti Criticises the selective silence of Western Feminism, shedding light on its prejudice against women in Gaza as it highlights the consequences of war on Israeli women, whereas, utterly ignoring the dire circumstances of women in Gaza (2024). She further elaborates that:

> This selective empathy reveals the true face of what we call 'imperial feminism.' It cherry-picks issues that align with western tastes and conveniently ignores the concerns of women from non-western backgrounds. Consider the global reaction to Iran's Mahsa Amini—a young woman punished for her 'improper' hijab, leading to her tragic death. The feminist movement rallied, staging dramatic hair-cutting protests in the heart of London. But where is the same outrage for Palestinian women facing displacement, violence, and loss?. (Para. 4)

Answering Moti's denunciatory question not only reflects a feminist discrimination but also brings to the fore the imperial powers' unwavering alignment with the Israeli narrative and their unrelenting misrepresentation of people in the East. Aldossari even feels more disappointed, claiming that 'This is not the first time western feminists have fallen short. This brand of feminism, with its history of shining a spotlight only on issues palatable to western tastes, often ignores the concerns of brown women' (Moti, 2024, Para. 7). According to Aldossari (2024), what Western feminism is concerned with is partially the supposed rape of Israeli women by members of Hamas and other Palestinian factions on October 7, disregarding the ordeals of women in Gaza and the tidings of sexual assault they encounter by Israeli soldiers. Aldossari highlights the disappointment Gazan women must feel as a result to the imperialist selective Western feminism that fails to provide the required sense of belonging to the oppressed Gazan women who are suffering as a result of the manifold physical and psychological torture by

the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza which uses Gazan women's physiological and psychological wellbeing as a target.

On 19 March 2024, in London, a group of 11 women stood outside the Houses of Parliament shaving their heads in solidarity with the suffering of Gazan women and children. One of these women says 'I'm 18 years old and I am cutting my hair in solidarity and in grief for all that is happening in Gaza' (Anadolu English, 2024). The women protesting held up signs advocating for a ceasefire and calls for stopping the blockade. One sign says: 'Lack of water is forcing women to shave their hair to prevent disease. Stop the blockade'. This act of solidarity and activism for the right of Palestinian women, however, was shot down by the selective imperialist feminism society that favours western women. A video of the mentioned protest was posted on twitter (Khalissee, 2024) and the majority of the comments show ignorance and people making fun of the 11 women calling them 'Ugly man ladies' (@tommypotts14, 22 March 2024), 'attention seekers' (@Madelei790622 March 7106, 2024) etc. Some even made a derogatory comment saying: 'WATCH: UGLY WOMEN GET EVEN UGLIER' (@astronomy89, 22 March 2024). Those women were attacked vigorously online for protesting the basic rights of Palestinian women in Gaza. Thus, not only does western feminism turn a blind eye to Gazan women's suffering, but they also actively enforce favouritism and actively critique women who support Gazan women. However, in 2022, Emily Schrader (2022) posts a video of an Israeli woman trimming her hair in solidarity with Iranian women and being cheered for doing such. This highlights the discriminatory nature of western feminism, wherein not all women are equal and instead Arab Muslim women remain within a minority that is selectively subjugated and discriminated against by western feminists.

Western feminism's robust response to the plight of Afghan women, especially during the Taliban's resurgence, contrasts starkly with its silence on the suffering of Gazan women. This reflects a pattern of selective empathy consistent with imperial feminism, which often focuses on issues aligned with Western political and ideological interests (Abu-Lughod, 2013). The overwhelming solidarity shown to Afghan women, framed through a Western saviour narrative, fits neatly into Western geopolitical discourses. Conversely, the relative silence on Gazan women underscores how imperial feminism disregards non-Western women's struggles when these conflicts involve Western allies, as seen in Israel's case (Mendoza, 2016). This selective empathy mirrors the global feminist reaction to Mahsa Amini's death versus the marginalisation of Gazan women facing brutalities under the Israeli occupation.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of Gazan women cutting their hair during the 2023–2024 Gazacide epitomises a profound narrative of resilience, identity, and resistance in the face of acute adversity. This practice, necessitated by severe shortages of water and sanitation supplies, signifies a profound erosion of bodily autonomy and personal identity in a cultural milieu where hair is venerated as a symbol of beauty and femininity. The compulsion to cut hair amid such a crisis serves as a poignant critique of the broader socio-political landscape, exposing the indifference of the international community and the inadequacy of both Arab and Muslim nations in addressing the plight of Gazan women.

This act of hair cutting also highlights the limitations and biases inherent in Western feminist discourse, which frequently disregards the specific and dire circumstances faced by Palestinian women while focusing on issues that resonate with Western sensibilities. This selective empathy not only marginalises the experiences of Gazan women but also underscores the discriminatory tendencies within global feminist narratives.

Palestinian women in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) face a unique and multifaceted condition shaped by the ongoing Israeli occupation and the broader context of violence, including the genocide in Gaza. Their experiences of subjectification – defined by the ways their identities and bodies are regulated – are deeply intertwined with the systemic oppression they endure. In this context, practices of securitisation serve to create a stark divide between those deemed secure, primarily Jewish citizens of Israel, and those rendered insecure, particularly Palestinian women and their communities.

The occupation manifests through various means, such as starvation, reproductive violence, and systematic killing, all of which disproportionately affect women and restrict their agency, autonomy, and skills of survival. These measures not only control their physical bodies but also serve to delegitimize their identities, subjecting them to a constant state of vulnerability and surveillance.

The trauma of living under such conditions engenders a complex response, where, on the opposite, acts of resistance emerge as a form of agency. Palestinian women, despite the oppressive forces they face, engage in various forms of resistance, from expressions of solidarity and resilience within their communities. This resistance is not solely about overt acts but also includes the preservation of cultural identity and everyday acts of defiance against dehumanisation.

In the context of the genocide in Gaza, these experiences are further exacerbated. The violence inflicted upon Gaza residents, including women, represents a brutal manifestation of the broader colonial project that seeks to erase Palestinian existence. This reality underscores the urgent need to recognise the interplay between gender, power, and violence, highlighting how women's experiences are critical to understanding the full scope of the ongoing crisis.

The insistence on separating the 'public' realm of political discourse from the 'private' lives of women in conflict zones obscures the vital connections between personal trauma and collective resistance. Ultimately, the lived experiences of Palestinian women, included haircut, illuminate the pervasive effects of occupation and genocide, revealing both the depths of their suffering and the strength of their resilience.

Moreover, the systematic humiliation and degradation of Gazan women, exacerbated by documented violence, abuse, and psychological trauma, can be construed as a strategic mechanism of domination aimed at undermining their resilience and dignity. The imposition of physical transformations and the deliberate assault on feminine identity are indicative of a broader strategy intended to erode the psychological and social cohesion of the Gazan community. These tactics, designed to justify further violence and dehumanisation, reflect an ongoing attempt to normalise and perpetuate the cycle of destruction and suffering.

In conclusion, the act of hair cutting among Gazan women should be interpreted not merely as a manifestation of self-harm but as a profound symbol of resistance against

a backdrop of systemic oppression and neglect. This practice underscores significant issues of socio-political disregard and the continuous struggle for recognition and support in the face of enduring violence and oppression.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Abdmolaei, S. (2013). *(Re) fashioning the Body politic: Women and the politics of dress in the Islamic Republic of Iran* [Doctoral dissertation, Concordia University].

Abed, R. (2024, August 14). *Gaza's girls cut off their hair for lack of combs*. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gazas-girls-cut-off-their-hair-lack-combs-2024-08-13/

Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim women need saving?*. Harvard University Press.

Achilli, L. (2015). *Palestinian refugees and identity: Nationalism, politics and the everyday*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

@ajplusarabi. (2024, August 26). *People keep asking me, are you bald?*. *Post*. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/reel/C-8Bo-ePnUW/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

Aldossari, M. (2024, February 22). *Western feminism's silence on Gaza lays bare its moral bankruptcy*. *Middle east eye*. https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/war-gaza-imperial-feminism-abandons-palestinian-women-how

Anadolu English. (2024, March 20). *Women in UK cut their hair in solidarity with Gaza*. *Video*. [Youtube]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UB2I5yDh4eE

Asadi Zeidabadi, P., & Aghtaie, N. (2023). 'The perspectives of Iranian feminists and women activists on gender equality in Iran'. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2225895

Barber, B. K., McNeely, C. A., El Sarraj, E., Daher, M., Giacaman, R., Arafat, C., Abu Mallouh, M., & Barnes, W. (2016). Mental suffering in protracted political conflict: Feeling broken or destroyed. *PLOS ONE*, *11*(5), e0156216. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0156216

Barhoom, I. [@samibarhoom]. (2024, February 11). *A witness of a released prisoner from Gaza after 50 days of imprisonment* [video]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/reel/C3MuVEQNAFK/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.

Cash, T. F. (2001). The psychology of hair loss and its implications for patient care. *Clinics in Dermatology*, *19*(2), 161–166.. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-081X(00)00127-9

Castro, A. F. H. (2015). From the "bio" to the "necro": The human at the border. In S E, Wilme, A, Žukauskaitė eds., *Resisting biopolitics* (pp. 249–265). London: Routledge.

Chaves, A. M., & Bacharach, S. (2021). Hair oppression and appropriation. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *61*(3), 335–352. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayab002

Daher-N, S., & Shalhoub-K, N. (2015). Sexual desire in the Israeli colonial apparatus. *Institute for Palestine Studies*, (104). https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/193137

Dhami, L. (2021). Psychology of hair loss patients and importance of counseling. *Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery*, *54*(4), 411–415.. https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0041-1741037

EFE. Children in Gaza getting just 10 percent of daily water requirement. (2023, December 20). *EFE*. https://efe.com/en/latest-news/2023-12-20/children-in-gaza-getting-just-10-percent-of-daily-water-requirement/

Ephgrave, N. (2016). On women's bodies: Experiences of dehumanization during the holocaust. *Journal of Women's History*, *28*(2), 12–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2016.0014

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction*. Random House.

Gaza women resort to head shaving amid dire water shortages. (2024, February 9). *Roya News*. https://en.royanews.tv/news/49160/2024-02-09

Giacaman, R. (2020). Reflections on the meaning of 'resilience'in the Palestinian context. *Journal of Public Health*, *42*(3), e369–e400. https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdz118

Hargrave, E. (2022, April 22). *Ukrainian girls forced to 'cut hair to be less attractive' and prevent Russian attacks*. *Express*. https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1592100/Ukrainian-Women-Girls-Protection-Assault-Russian-War-Crimes-Violence-Against-Women-VN

Harter, S. (2000). Is self-esteem only skin-deep? The inextricable link between physical appearance and self-esteem. *Reclaiming Children & Youth*, *9*(3), 133–138.

Jankowski, P. (2007). *Shaving Women's heads during world war II: Gender and punishment in France*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Joseph, S. (1999). *Intimate selving in Arab families: Gender, self, and identity*. Syracuse University Press.

Karaman, N., & Christian, M. (2022). "Should I wear a headscarf to be a good Muslim woman?": Situated meanings of the hijab among Muslim college women in America. *Sociological Inquiry*, *92* (1), 225–243. https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12454

@Khalissee. (2024, March 21). *WATCH: AMAZING SOLIDARITY women in London shave their heads in front of parliament, in solidarity with Palestinian women in Gaza under Israeli genocide*. [tweet]. X. https://x.com/Kahlissee/status/1770876141147955296

Khatam, A. (2023). Mahsa Amini's killing, state violence, and moral policing in Iran. *Human Geography*, *16*(3), 299–306. https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786231159357

Kohan, M. A. (2022). Politics of the body in the 'woman, life, freedom' movement in Iran. *Psychotherapy & Politics International*, *20*(4), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v20i4.06

Kringen, A. L., & Novich, M. (2018). Is it 'just hair' or is it 'everything'? Embodiment and gender repression in policing. *Gender, Work, & Organization*, *25*(2), 195–213.. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12207

Levi, P. (1993). *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi assault on humanity*. Macmillan.

Mahmood, S. (2004). Women's agency within feminist historiography. *The Journal of Religion*, *84*(4), 573–579. https://doi.org/10.1086/422481

Mahmood, S. (2013). Agency, gender, and embodiment. In M. M. Wilcox (Ed.), *Religion in today's world: Global issues, sociological perspectives* (pp. 271–296). London: Routledge.

Masri, M. [@mohamed.h.masri]. *Among the wounded who arrived at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital due to the bombing in Al-Nusseirat area are two little girls covered in blood*. *Instagram*. (2024, Feb 21) https://www.instagram.com/reel/C3nsqsbrrVw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, *15*(1), 11–40. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11

Mbilishaka, A. M., & Apugo, D. (2020). Brushed aside: African American women's narratives of hair bias in school. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *23*(5), 634–653. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1718075

McKinley, C. E. (2023). *Understanding indigenous gender relations and violence*. Springer.

Mendoza, B. (2016). Coloniality of gender and Power: From postcoloniality to decoloniality. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *33*(7–8), 37–56.

Moses, J. (2024). Gaza and the political and moral failure of the responsibility to protect. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, *18*(2), 211–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2304987

Moti, A. (2024, February 25). The war on Gaza: Unmasking western Feminism's silence - OpEd. *Eurasia review*. https://www.eurasiareview.com/25022024-the-war-on-gaza-unmasking-western-feminisms-silence-oped/

Olujic, M. B. (1998). Embodiment of terror: Gendered violence in peacetime and wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-herzegovina. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *12*(1), 31–50. https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.1998.12.1.31

Onnie Rogers, L., & Versey, H. S., Cielto, J. (2022). "They're always gonna notice my natural hair": Identity, intersectionality and resistance among black girls. *Qualitative Psychology*, *9*(3), 211–231. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000208

Owda, B. [@wizard_bisan1]. (2023, December 15). *I love my hair so much! I love the gorgeous curls on my head but I couldn't keep them!* [post]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C04gcL8rB92/

?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==https://www.instagram.com/reel/C3nsqsbrrVw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Pharaoh, M. A. (2023, November 28). *Specialized psychological Trainer at the family health care institute explains the psychological effects of women cutting their hair in Gaza due to war*. [[Radio Broadcast]. *Radio Al-Balad*]. https://soundcloud.com/user-802211363/0ardcb03trok?fbclid=IwAR12NxLu4BC_BOD5_p6I2FrdZbYZosjnQSqNCX6kBv49oT1vZ0R_AeTAohY

Philipose, L. (2007). The politics of pain and the uses of torture. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *32*(4), 1047–1071. https://doi.org/10.1086/513022

Sabah, W. (2024, February 6). *War on Gaza: Palestinian women forced to shave their heads due to water shortage*. *Middle east eye*. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/war-gaza-palestinian-women-forced-shave-their-heads-due-water-shortage

Said, E. W., & Hitchens, C. (Eds.). (2001). *Blaming the victims: Spurious scholarship and the Palestinian question*. Verso.

Schrader, E. [@emilykschrader]. (2022, October 6). *Today in Jerusalem #Israel, an Israeli cuts her hair in solidarity with the women of #iran*. [Tweet]. X. https://x.com/emilykschrader/status/1578110512788897792

Seigelshifer, V. (2006). *From Tichles to hair bands: Modern Orthodox women and the practice of head covering* [Master's thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem].

van der Donk, J. (1992). *Psychosocial aspects of androgenetic alopecia*. Proefschrift Rotterdam. CIP-gegevens Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

Veronese, G., Montali, L., Cavazzoni, F., Mattiuzzi, D. (2022). Toward a culture-informed conceptualization of child agency in a context characterized by political and military violence. A qualitative exploration throughout experts' voices. *Child Indicators Research*, *15*(4), 1379–1403. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-022-09932-6

Veronese, G., Sousa, C., Cavazzoni, F. (2021). Survival and resilience among Palestinian women: A qualitative analysis using individual and collective life events calendars. *Violence Against Women*, *27*(6–7), 900–917. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220914406

Weitz, R. (2004). *Rapunzel's daughters: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

WHO (2023). Risk of disease spread soars in Gaza as health facilities, water and sanitation systems disrupted. (2023, November 8). *World Health Organization*. https://www.emro.who.int/media/news/risk-of-disease-spread-soars-in-gaza-as-health-facilities-water-and-sanitation-systems-disrupted.html