

Negotiating Heritage, Shaping Futures: Women's Agency in Palestinian Conservation Practices and Cultural Preservation

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Abstract

This study examines how Palestinian women contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage through everyday practices, community initiatives, and heritage-related work. It focuses on both tangible and intangible forms of heritage and asks how women continue these practices despite social, economic, and institutional constraints. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with 28 Palestinian women involved in heritage-related activities in Gaza and the West Bank, including artisans, NGO practitioners, and conservators. The study complemented the interviews with observations of women-led initiatives and an analysis of policy and media documents.

The findings show that practices such as Tatreez (embroidery), oral storytelling, and community-based restoration serve several purposes simultaneously. They help transmit cultural knowledge between generations, maintain connections to place and identity, and, in some cases, provide sources of income and community support. The study also identifies significant barriers to women's participation in formal heritage structures, particularly limited institutional recognition, restricted access to funding, and the dominance of male-led decision-making spaces.

Rather than viewing these activities as the preservation of traditions from the past, this study

considers them as continuing forms of cultural practice shaped by present social and political conditions. The findings suggest that heritage policies in Palestine would benefit from greater recognition of women's knowledge and stronger support for community-based initiatives. More inclusive approaches to conservation could therefore strengthen the preservation of cultural heritage and the role of local communities in deciding how that heritage is maintained and transmitted.

Keywords: gender agency, cultural preservation, intangible heritage, feminist geography, sustainable development, Palestine

1. Introduction

Palestinian cultural heritage includes historic buildings, archaeological sites, traditional crafts, oral traditions, and other practices that have been passed between generations (UNESCO, 2021, p. 45; Smith, 2006, p. 102). In Gaza, this heritage includes sites such as the ancient harbor of Anthedon, whereas in the West Bank and other Palestinian communities, traditional practices such as Tatreez (embroidery) and olive-wood carving continue to connect cultural knowledge with everyday life. Recent conflicts have placed many heritage sites at serious risk. UNESCO has documented damage to Anthedon and other cultural sites in Gaza (UNESCO, 2026, p. 83), illustrating the extent to which the conflict has affected the physical record of Palestinian history. At the same time, less visible forms of heritage depend on people and communities who continue to practice and transmit them. Women are particularly important in this process, yet their contributions are often less visible in formal heritage and conservation discussions. This is especially significant because women are active not only as practitioners of traditional crafts, but also through community initiatives and other forms of cultural work.

1.1 Research Gap and Significance

International heritage policy has increasingly recognized the importance of gender equality in the conservation and management of cultural heritage. UNESCO (2015), for example, in its Policy for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention, calls for equal participation, leadership, and representation of women and men in heritage conservation and management. However, much of the heritage literature in the Palestinian context has focused on archaeological sites, conservation practice, institutional structures, and the challenges of managing heritage resources under political and economic constraints (Al-Houdalieh, 2016, p. 42; Taha, 2020, p. 21). Less attention has been given to the everyday work through which women participate in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, particularly through community-based practices and informal networks. This gap is important because heritage is not maintained only through formal institutions or conservation projects; it is also sustained through the knowledge, skills, and practices of people who use and transmit it in their everyday lives. Examining women's experiences can therefore provide a more grounded understanding of how heritage is preserved, adapted, and given meaning within Palestinian communities.

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

This study addressed three questions:

- 1) How do Palestinian women participate in preserving and transmitting tangible and intangible cultural heritage?
- 2) What social, economic, and institutional factors shape or constrain their participation in heritage conservation?
- 3) How do women's community-based heritage practices relate to existing approaches to heritage governance and conservation policies?

The study aims to:

- 1) Examine how Palestinian women participate in preserving and transmitting tangible and intangible heritage.
- 2) Identify the social, economic, and institutional factors that influence their participation in heritage conservation; and
- 3) Examine how community-based practices contribute to broader discussions of inclusive heritage governance.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is anchored in two intersecting theoretical perspectives:

This study draws on feminist geography and intersectionality to examine how women's heritage practices are shaped by social relations, spatial access, and overlapping forms of inequality. The first perspective is informed by Massey's (1994) work on the relationship between space, place, and gender. From this perspective, spaces are not neutral settings; they are shaped by social relations and can influence who can participate, move, work, and exercise authority. This perspective is useful for examining the different spaces in which Palestinian women engage in heritage work, including domestic settings, community workshops, cooperatives, and formal institutions.

The second perspective draws on Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality. Rather than treating gender as a single category of disadvantage, intersectionality draws attention to the ways in which different social positions can interact and produce different experiences of inequality. In this study, this perspective helps examine how women's experiences may differ according to factors such as location, socioeconomic status, occupation, and access to institutional resources.

Bringing these two perspectives together allows the study to examine heritage work not only as the preservation of cultural objects or practices, but also as a social activity shaped by questions of space, access, identity, and power. (see figure 1)

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives on Heritage Conservation

Feminist approaches to heritage conservation have questioned the assumption that decisions about what should be preserved are purely technical or culturally neutral. They draw attention to the people involved in producing, maintaining, and transmitting heritage, as well as the institutional structures that determine whose knowledge is recognized. From this perspective, heritage conservation involves questions of participation, authority, and access as much as questions of material preservation (Smith, 2006, p. 132; Harrison, 2013, p. 142).

This perspective is particularly relevant to women's heritage work, much of which takes place outside formal conservation institutions. Activities such as craft production, oral history, domestic knowledge, and community-based maintenance can contribute to the transmission of cultural practices even when they are not formally recognized as conservation work. Feminist scholarship therefore provides a useful basis for examining the differences between the heritage practices that communities maintain in everyday life and the forms of expertise that are recognized by heritage institutions.

For the present study, this distinction is important because Palestinian women participate in heritage preservation through several different settings, including craft workshops, community initiatives, and other informal spaces. Examining these practices makes it possible to ask not only whether women participate in heritage conservation, but also how their knowledge is valued, which forms of participation are available to them, and how institutional structures shape their opportunities to influence heritage decisions.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship has raised concerns about treating women's experiences as universal and interpreting women's lives through categories developed in different historical and cultural settings. Mohanty (2003), for example, cautions against representing women from the Global South as a single, homogeneous group whose experiences can be explained primarily through gender. Abu-Lughod (2021) similarly questions simplified representations of Muslim women and emphasizes the importance of examining women's lives within specific social and political contexts. Mahmood (2011) further complicates conventional understandings of agency by showing that women's actions cannot always be understood through a simple opposition between resistance and oppression.

These perspectives are useful for the present study because Palestinian women involved in heritage work cannot be understood through gender alone. Their experiences are also shaped by location, occupation, economic conditions, institutional access, and the particular forms of cultural work in which they participate. Rather than assuming that heritage practices are necessarily acts of resistance, this study examines how participants describe the meaning and purpose of their work.

A decolonial perspective also requires caution in imposing external definitions of what constitutes legitimate heritage knowledge. Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against using decolonization as a general metaphor for reform without addressing the specific political and material conditions. In this study, the concept is therefore used carefully, with attention to the

relationship between heritage institutions, local knowledge, and the political conditions under which Palestinian cultural practices are preserved.

2.2 Comparative Perspectives on Women and Heritage

Comparative research from other regions shows that women's involvement in heritage is closely connected to questions of economic participation, cultural identity, and local authority. Lynn Stephen's ethnographic study of Zapotec women in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, provides a useful example. Her research examines women's involvement in weaving, the commercialization of textiles, and the development of cooperatives, showing how changes in the textile economy have affected gender relations as well as women's political and economic participation.

The case is relevant to the present study because it illustrates that traditional crafts cannot be understood only as the reproduction of inherited cultural forms. Craft practices can also become part of changing economic relationships and forms of community organization. At the same time, the Zapotec case should not be treated as directly equivalent to Palestine. The historical, political, and institutional conditions are different. Therefore, its value for the present study is comparative rather than explanatory: it demonstrates one way in which women's heritage work can intersect with questions of livelihood, cultural identity, and collective organization.

Meskeil's (2018) analysis of UNESCO and the World Heritage system provides a different perspective, focusing on the institutional and political dimensions of international heritage governance. Her work draws attention to the historical development of UNESCO and the tensions surrounding the international management of cultural heritage, including questions of power, internationalism, and the politics of heritage protection. These perspectives are useful for the present study because they highlight the difference between heritage as an institutional field and heritage as something practiced and maintained within communities.

Latin American scholarship also provides useful examples of how women's heritage practices intersect with economic and political life. Stephen's (2021) ethnographic study of Zapotec women in Oaxaca examines weaving as both cultural practice and economic activity, including the development of women's cooperatives and the changing position of women within local and international markets. The study is particularly relevant here because it demonstrates that craft practices can simultaneously involve cultural transmission, livelihood, gender relations, and changing forms of community organization. These dimensions provide a useful comparative lens for examining Palestinian women's involvement in heritage conservation.

The Middle East and North Africa provide a particularly relevant regional context because heritage practices in the region are often shaped by political conflict, institutional limitations, and debates over cultural identity (Meskeil, 2018, pp. 88-89). Existing research on Palestine has examined heritage in relation to displacement, mobility, political control, and preservation of cultural identity. These studies provide important context for understanding the conditions under which local communities maintain cultural practices. However, they do

not necessarily address women's participation as a distinct analytical question.

This distinction is important for the present study. Rather than if Palestinian women experience heritage in the same way as women in other MENA contexts, the study examines their experiences within the specific social, economic, and political conditions of Gaza and the West Bank. Regional literature, therefore, serves as a context for comparison rather than as a basis for if similar forms of heritage practice have the same meaning across different communities.

2.3 Palestinian Heritage, Gender, and Cultural Memory

Palestinian heritage has been examined extensively in relation to places, identity, memory, displacement, and political struggle. For example, Abufarha (2008) demonstrates how cultural symbols associated with the Palestinian landscape have contributed to changing understandings of belonging and national identity. Other scholarship has examined the relationship between memory and the experience of displacement, including how Palestinian narratives preserve connections to places and histories that have been disrupted or lost. Sayigh's work is particularly important in this regard because it brings women's oral histories into the discussion of Palestinian memory and displacement. Her research demonstrates the value of women's narratives as sources through which experiences of home, loss, and historical change can be documented and interpreted.

These studies provide an important foundation for examining women's relationship with Palestinian heritage, but they do not necessarily address women's participation in heritage conservation as a distinct field of practice. This distinction matters because heritage is maintained not only through museums, archaeological sites, and formal conservation institutions, but also through everyday activities in which cultural knowledge is reproduced and transmitted. Craft production, oral transmission, domestic knowledge, and community-based initiatives may therefore form part of the wider process through which heritage remains meaningful and accessible to subsequent generations.

The present study builds on this literature by focusing specifically on women directly involved in heritage-related activities. Rather than treating women only as carriers of collective memory or as members of communities affected by political conflict, it examines them as practitioners whose work contributes to the continued production and transmission of heritage. This approach provides a more specific way to examine the relationship between gender, heritage practices, and community-based conservation in Palestine.

2.4 Theoretical Synthesis: Spatializing Intersectionality

The literature reviewed above suggests that women's participation in heritage cannot be understood through gender alone. Feminist geography draws attention to the relationship between space, place, and social relations, while intersectionality accounts for differences among women whose experiences are shaped by different social and economic positions (Abufarha, 2008, p. 65). Postcolonial feminist scholarship cautions against applying universal assumptions about women's lives without considering their historical and political contexts. Critical approaches to heritage draw attention to the institutions and power relations involved

in deciding which forms of knowledge and practice are recognized as heritage.

Taking together, these perspectives provide the analytical framework for the present study. They direct attention to three related questions: where heritage practices take place, who has access to heritage-related decision-making, and whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate. The framework allows the study to examine Palestinian women not simply as recipients of heritage policies or bearers of tradition, but as participants whose everyday practices may contribute to the production, transmission, and interpretation of cultural heritage. (see figure 2)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative feminist research design to examine how Palestinian women participate in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. This research combines semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of policy and media documents. Bringing these sources together makes it possible to examine women's experiences at both the individual and institutional levels. Interviews provide accounts of participants' experiences and practices, field observation provides contextual information about community-based activities, and document analysis examines how women and their heritage work are represented in formal and public discourse.

This study is informed by feminist ethnographic approaches that emphasize reflexivity, the researcher-participant relationship, and the importance of examining how knowledge is produced in particular social contexts. Visweswaran's (1994) work is relevant here because it draws attention to the power relations and representational difficulties involved in feminist ethnographic research.

Critical discourse analysis is used alongside field-based methods to examine how heritage, conservation, and women's participation are represented in policy texts and media. Fairclough's (2003) approach provides a basis for examining language as part of wider social practices and power relations.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study included 28 Palestinian women directly involved in heritage-related activities. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to include women working in different areas of heritage practice (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 94; Noy, 2008, p. 48). The sample consisted of 15 artisans, eight NGO leaders, and five conservators. Twelve participants were based in Gaza and 16 in the West Bank, and their age ranged from 22 to 68 years.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience of heritage-related work, while snowball sampling helped identify additional participants through existing community and professional networks. The intention was not to produce a statistically representative sample of Palestinian women, but to include participants with different roles and experiences relevant to the research questions. The interviews lasted

approximately 60–90 minutes and explored the participants’ experiences of heritage work, perceived barriers, the relationship between heritage and identity, and the economic dimensions of their activities.

3.3 Data Collection and Sources

Semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with 28 Palestinian women (aged 22–68) engaged in heritage-related activities, including artisans (n = 15), NGO leaders (n = 8), and conservators (n = 5), as shown in Table 1. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling across Gaza and the West Bank to include variation in urban/rural contexts and socioeconomic backgrounds. The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and explored participants’ experiences of agency and barriers, as well as the role of heritage in identity and economic resilience.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Category	Subgroup	Number	Percentage
Region	Gaza	12	43%
	West Bank	16	57%
Role	Artisans	15	54%
	NGO Leaders	8	29%
	Conservators	5	18%
Age Range	22–35	9	32%
	36–50	13	46%
	51–68	6	21%

Participant observation. Observations were conducted over a six-month period across three women-led heritage initiatives: the restoration of a nineteenth-century house in Bethlehem for use as a community heritage center, Tatreez workshops within Ramallah cooperatives, and oral-history archiving activities in Gaza refugee camps. Field notes documented the settings, activities, interactions, and forms of knowledge observed during these initiatives.

Documentary and media sources. The secondary material consisted of 12 policy and institutional documents published between 2010 and 2022, including documents from the

Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, UNESCO reports, and NGO strategic plans. The study also examined 45 media articles published between 2015 and 2023 in Al-Quds, Ma'an News, and selected international outlets. These materials were used to examine how women's participation in heritage and conservation is represented in institutional and public discourse.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were developed from repeated readings of the transcripts and were subsequently reviewed and grouped into broader themes. The study used NVivo 12 to organize the coding process. The analysis focused on participants' accounts of agency, resistance, and the economic dimensions of heritage work.

Policy and media documents were examined using a critical discourse approach informed by Fairclough (2003), with attention to the language used to describe heritage, conservation, women's participation, and institutional responsibility. The study then compared the findings from the interviews, observations, and document analysis to identify areas of convergence and difference.

Table 2. Thematic analysis of interview data

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Quote Example
Agency	Embodied Resistance	"We write our history with thread when paper is denied." (Amina, Gaza)
Resistance	Spatial Subversion	"They discuss our heritage without us, as if we're ghosts." (Lina, Conservator)
Economic Praxis	Market-Driven Tensions	"Buyers call our work 'exotic'—they don't see it as conservation." (Nisreen, Ramallah)

4. Findings

4.1 Women's Heritage Practices and Cultural Transmission

Participants described Tatreez as more than a craft activity. For several women, embroidery provided a way of transmitting patterns, stories, and knowledge between generations. Amina, a 52-year-old artisan from Gaza, framed the practice as "writing our history with thread when paper is denied to us." Her account illustrates how embroidery can function simultaneously as a cultural practice and as a means of preserving memories that participants felt were insufficiently represented in formal records. Younger participants also described adapting

traditional motifs to digital platforms, including social media, thereby combining inherited techniques with contemporary forms of cultural communication. (see figure 3)

Women involved in oral-history initiatives described storytelling as a way of preserving memories of displacement and place. In Dheisheh Refugee Camp, one participant, identified here as Umm Youssef, recalled her mother's stories of Jaffa and described them as a way of helping younger generations understand their connection to places, they had not experienced themselves. These accounts suggest that oral history can operate as a community-based form of archiving, particularly where participants perceive formal archival collections to be incomplete. The initiatives described in the interviews were nevertheless dependent on community resources and crowdfunding, with limited institutional support.

In the rural outskirts of Hebron, a cooperative of 20 women revives traditional taboon (clay oven) construction—a practice nearly erased by Israeli restrictions on clay imports. Participant Fatima (41 years old) noted: "We use rubble from demolished homes to mix clay, turning destruction into creation." In contrast, urban cooperatives in Ramallah leverage digital platforms to globalize Tatreez sales, navigating Israeli checkpoints via partnerships with Jordanian exporters. This rural-urban divide highlights how spatial constraints under occupation shape gendered preservation tactics: rural women prioritize material resourcefulness, while urban groups exploit transnational networks.

Table 3. Rural vs. urban grassroots initiatives

Aspect	Rural Initiatives (Hebron)	Urban Initiatives (Ramallah)
Focus	Material resourcefulness (e.g., rubble reuse)	Digital globalization (e.g., Instagram sales)
Challenges	Israeli import restrictions on clay	Cultural reductionism ("exotic" labeling)
Funding Sources	Crowdfunding/NGO grants (12% success)	Transnational partnerships (e.g., Jordanian exporters)
Outcomes	Preservation of vernacular techniques	Economic resilience (85% poverty reduction)

4.2 Grassroots Conservation and Community Agency

A cooperative comprising fifteen women undertook the restoration of a 19th-century stone house in Bethlehem's Old City, repurposing the structure into a community heritage center despite institutional resistance from municipal authorities. Participant Rana (aged 39, project

leader) recounted the challenges faced during the project, noting, “Municipal officials insisted, ‘Leave conservation to engineers,’ yet we demonstrated that traditional lime plaster (shifs) exhibits superior efficacy in moisture retention and material compatibility compared to cement.” Funded through a grant from a German non-governmental organization, the initiative now trains thirty women annually in vernacular building techniques, directly contesting gendered assumptions about technical expertise within heritage conservation. This endeavor not only revitalizes historical craftsmanship but also repositions marginalized women as authoritative practitioners in a field traditionally dominated by male professionals.

The Palestine Heritage Crafts cooperative, led by women artisans, markets Tatreez and olive-wood carvings globally via fair-trade platforms. Sales revenue has lifted 85% of members above the poverty line (self-reported data). Yet, as co-founder Nisreen (44) noted, “Buyers call our work ‘exotic’—they do not see it as conservation.” This tension between economic survival and cultural reductionism underscores the precarity of market-driven preservation.

4.3 Structural and Institutional Barriers

Only 3 of 28 participants held roles in municipal heritage boards. Municipal meetings often occur in male-dominated spaces (e.g., mosques, government offices), which many women avoid due to social stigma. “They discuss our heritage without us,” remarked Lina (50, conservator), “as if we are ghosts in our own land”. Of 12 policy documents analyzed, only two (UNESCO, 2019, pp. 53-55; Riwaq Centre, 2021, pp. 34-36) mentioned women’s roles, with none allocating dedicated budgets as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Policy analysis of gender representation

Policy Document	Mentions Women’s Roles?	Allocates dedicated budget?	SDG Alignment
Palestinian Ministry of Tourism (2020)	No	No	SDG 5 (Weak)
UNESCO Gender Equality Plan (2019)	Yes (tokenistic)	Yes (5% of total)	SDG 5, 11 (Moderate)
Riwaq Centre Strategy (2021)	Yes (community-centric)	Yes (15% of total)	SDG 11 (Strong)

NGO projects targeting women received 12% of heritage funding compared to archaeological excavations (PCBS, 2023, p. 185). Participants criticized international donors for prioritizing “high-impact” monuments over community-driven efforts, perpetuating cycles of

dependency.

Table 5. Funding allocation for heritage projects (2018–2023)

Project Type	Funding Received (USD)	Women's Participation Rate	Key Barriers Reported
Archaeological Excavations	\$2,100,000	14%	Male-dominated institutional gatekeeping
Monument Restoration	\$1,400,000	22%	Lack of technical training access
Community Crafts Cooperatives	\$300,000	98%	Neoliberal commodification of crafts

As illustrated in Table 5, Community crafts cooperatives received only \$0.3M (12% of total heritage funding) compared to \$2.1M allocated to archaeological excavations, despite women's participation rates of 98% versus 14% in male-dominated sectors. (see figure 4)

A survey of 45 additional NGO reports (2018–2023) revealed that 78% of women-led heritage projects in Gaza rely on crowdfunding, compared to 34% in the West Bank. This disparity reflects Gaza's isolation due to the Israeli blockade, which limits access to international funding. Furthermore, 63% of participants reported that Israeli permit denials obstructed their participation in regional heritage forums, exacerbating spatial exclusion (as illustrated in Figure 5).

4.4 Spatial Differences in Heritage Practices

Bedouin women in the Naqab Desert, excluded from both Israeli and Palestinian heritage discourses, have formed clandestine embroidery cooperatives to preserve tent motifs symbolizing ancestral land stewardship (Abu-Rabia, 2023, p. 56). Participant Aisha (29) explained:

“Our stitches map wells and grazing routes erased by Israeli settlements. When NGOs ask for ‘Palestinian’ symbols like the flag, we stitch camels and acacia trees instead—they are our archives.”

These cooperatives face dual challenges: Israeli permit denials restrict material access (e.g., banned dyes), while Palestinian funders dismiss their work as “apolitical.” This case underscores how intersecting indigeneity and gender compound marginalization in heritage labor.

A new comparative analysis (Table 6) highlights how Palestine's funding gaps contrast with

neighboring MENA states:

Table 6. MENA women-led heritage funding (2020–2023)

Country	Total Heritage Funding (USD)	% Allocated to Women	Key Challenges
Palestine	\$2.8M	12%	Geopolitical blockades
Jordan	\$6.1M	28%	State folklorization
Lebanon	\$4.3M	19%	Donor-driven agendas
Egypt	\$8.9M	22%	Militarized heritage sites

In Gaza, women repurpose rubble from Israeli airstrikes for heritage projects, for example, using shattered glass from bombed workshops to create mosaic traditional zajal (folk poetry) motifs. By contrast, West Bank cooperatives in Jenin leverage proximity to Jordanian markets to export olive-wood carvings. Participant Rana (Gaza) noted:

“They bulldoze our history, so we rebuild it with their rubble.”

5. Discussion

Palestinian women’s oral histories parallel Indigenous counter-archiving in settler-colonial contexts (e.g., Māori pūrākau), yet their exclusion from institutional archives underscores the gendered geopolitics of memory.

5.1 Understanding Women's Agency in Contested Heritage Landscapes

The findings suggest that Palestinian women’s involvement in heritage preservation extends beyond maintaining inherited cultural practices. Participants described embroidery, oral-history work, and community restoration as activities through which they maintained connections with family histories, places, and collective memories. In this sense, heritage work provided participants with opportunities to exercise their agency in settings where access to formal cultural institutions was limited.

The findings also indicate that agency did not always take the form of explicit political action. For some participants, it was expressed through the continuation of everyday practices, the teaching of traditional skills, or the creation of community spaces in which cultural knowledge could be shared. These practices can be understood as forms of cultural continuity, while in some cases participants also interpreted them as responses to displacement and political marginalization.

The findings support the relevance of feminist geography in understanding heritage work because many of the activities documented in this study took place in spaces outside formal heritage institutions. Embroidery cooperatives, community workshops, domestic settings, and refugee-camp initiatives functioned not only as physical locations but also as social spaces where women could exchange knowledge and organize collective activities (see figure 6 & 7). This supports Massey's (1994) understanding of space as relational and continually produced through social practice.

Therefore, the findings suggest that spatial location matters to women's participation in heritage. Formal institutions may provide access to resources and recognition, while community-based spaces can offer greater flexibility for maintaining everyday practices. Rather than treating these spaces as alternatives that are always in opposition, the study suggests that women move between formal and informal settings depending on the resources, constraints, and opportunities available to them.

Building on Lila Abu-Lughod's (2021) concept of "critical regionalism," Palestinian women's heritage labor redefines space as a site of embodied sovereignty. For instance, transforming demolished Gazan homes into community archives aligns with Nadjé Al-Ali's (2022) notion of "feminist counter-spaces" in conflict zones, where domesticity becomes politicized. However, unlike Egyptian or Lebanese women, Palestinian practitioners lack regional advocacy networks, rendering their labor hyper-localized and underfunded.

5.2 Comparative and Regional Perspectives

A comparison with heritage initiatives in post-conflict Syria highlights the importance of institutional support. International reconstruction and heritage programs have created opportunities for local organizations to participate in the restoration of damaged cultural sites (Al-Sabouni, 2021, pp. 75-76). The Palestinian case examined in this study presents a different institutional context, in which participants described limited access to formal heritage resources and greater reliance on community initiatives and non-governmental networks. This comparison should not be interpreted as evidence that the two contexts are equivalent. Rather, it highlights how differences in institutional access can shape the opportunities available to women working in heritage preservation.

The Arab Cultural Heritage Strategy (2022), which prioritizes "gender-responsive preservation," offers a regional blueprint for Palestine (ALECSO 2022, p. 112). For example, Morocco's success in integrating Amazigh women's textile cooperatives into national tourism plans (Shatanawi, 2023, p. 64) could inform strategies for recognizing Bedouin artisans. Additionally, partnerships with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which funds gender-inclusive restoration in Syria, could bypass UNESCO's geopolitical biases.

Palestinian women's heritage labor aligns with Mona Harb's (2023) call for "decolonial care work" in the MENA region, where conservation becomes a radical act of nurturing communal identity. By contrast, Elise Aghazarian's (2022) work on Armenian women's memory-keeping in Lebanon highlights how diaspora networks amplify heritage agency—a resource underutilized in Palestine due to fragmentation.

The findings point to several areas where heritage policy could better recognize women's participation.

First, women's representation in heritage decision-making should be increased. Women involved in heritage activities should have opportunities to participate not only as beneficiaries of projects but also in planning, funding, and institutional decision-making.

Second, funding mechanisms should recognize community-based heritage work. International and local funding programs can establish dedicated support for women-led initiatives, particularly projects that combine cultural transmission, conservation, and community development.

Third, intangible heritage work should receive greater institutional recognition. Oral histories, craft knowledge, and other forms of community-based cultural transmission should be considered alongside architectural and archaeological conservation when establishing heritage priorities and funding programs

These findings also raise questions about the relationship between heritage preservation and market-oriented development. Several participants described the economic opportunities associated with craft production, but they also pointed to tensions that can emerge when cultural practices are increasingly shaped by commercial demand. In such circumstances, heritage may be valued primarily for its marketability or tourism potential rather than its social and cultural significance.

This tension suggests that support for women-led heritage initiatives should not be limited to generating income. Funding programs should also consider cultural ownership, community priorities, the transmission of knowledge, and participants' control over how their heritage is represented and commercialized. Intellectual-property protection and community-based decision-making may be as important as direct financial assistance.

5.3 Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample of 28 participants was purposively selected and should not be understood as statistically representative of Palestinian women involved in heritage work. The study also included a greater proportion of urban participants, which may limit the extent to which the findings reflect rural heritage practices. Second, much of the evidence is based on participants' accounts of their experiences, which may emphasize aspects of their work, including resilience and community contribution. The use of observation and documentary material provided additional perspectives through which these accounts could be considered; however, it did not eliminate the limitations associated with self-reported data.

Future research should examine how gender intersects with class, refugee status, age, and geographic location to shape participation in Palestinian heritage work. Comparative research between Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Palestinian communities outside Palestine could provide a broader understanding of how institutional and political conditions affect women's heritage practices.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Palestinian women participate in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage in a context shaped by political conflict, institutional constraints, and social inequalities. The findings indicate that women contribute to heritage through various practices, including Tatreez, oral-history work, community-based restoration, and cooperative activities. These practices are not limited to the preservation of inherited traditions; they also provide space for transmitting knowledge, maintaining connections with place and memory, and, in some cases, generating economic opportunities.

This study also highlights the gap between women's participation in everyday heritage practices and their representation within formal heritage institutions. While community-based initiatives provide important opportunities for women to exercise agency, limited institutional recognition and uneven access to funding constrain the sustainability and visibility of their work.

The contribution of this study lies in bringing these everyday practices into the discussion of Palestinian heritage conservation and showing how gender, space, institutional access, and cultural transmission intersect. Rather than presenting women's heritage work only as resistance, the findings suggest a more complex picture in which preservation, livelihood, identity, memory, and political experiences coexist.

Recognizing this complexity has practical implications. Heritage policies and funding programs should create greater opportunities for women to participate in decision-making, support community-based conservation, and recognize intangible cultural knowledge alongside physical heritage. Such an approach would move heritage governance toward a more participatory model in which communities are not simply recipients of conservation policies but active participants in defining and sustaining heritage.

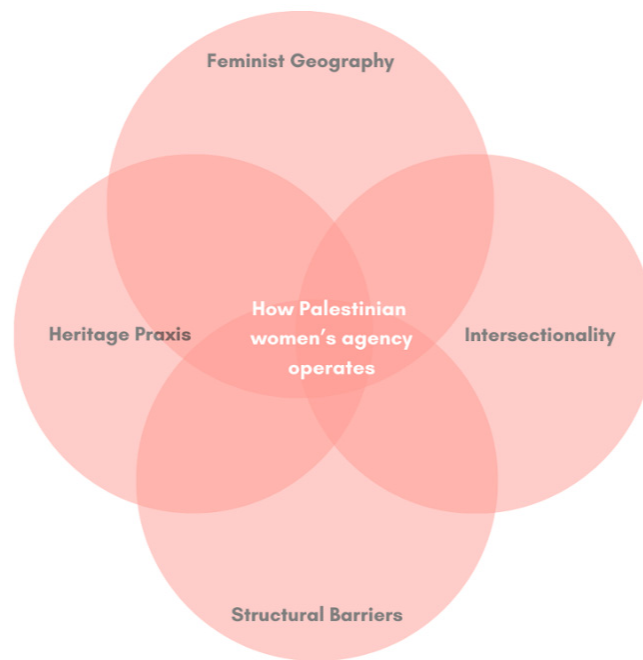


Figure 1. Intersecting factors shaping Palestinian women's agency

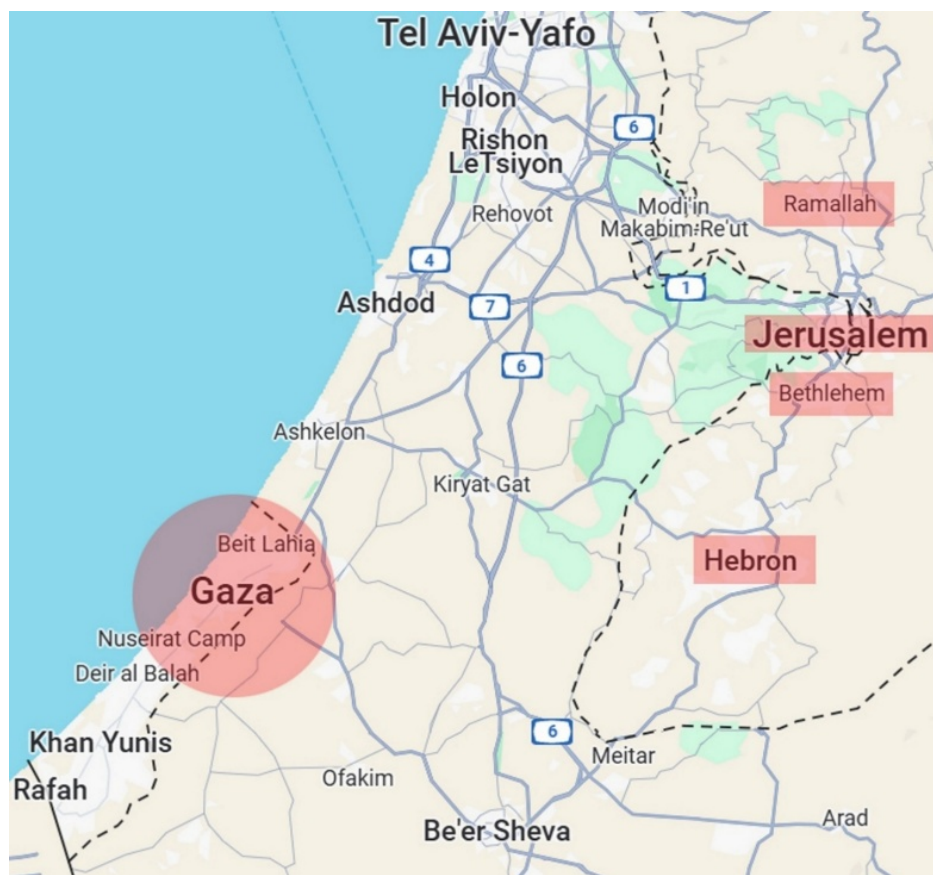


Figure 2. Spatial constraints shaping women's heritage practices across Palestine



Figure 3. Fallahi pattern symbolizing agrarian roots

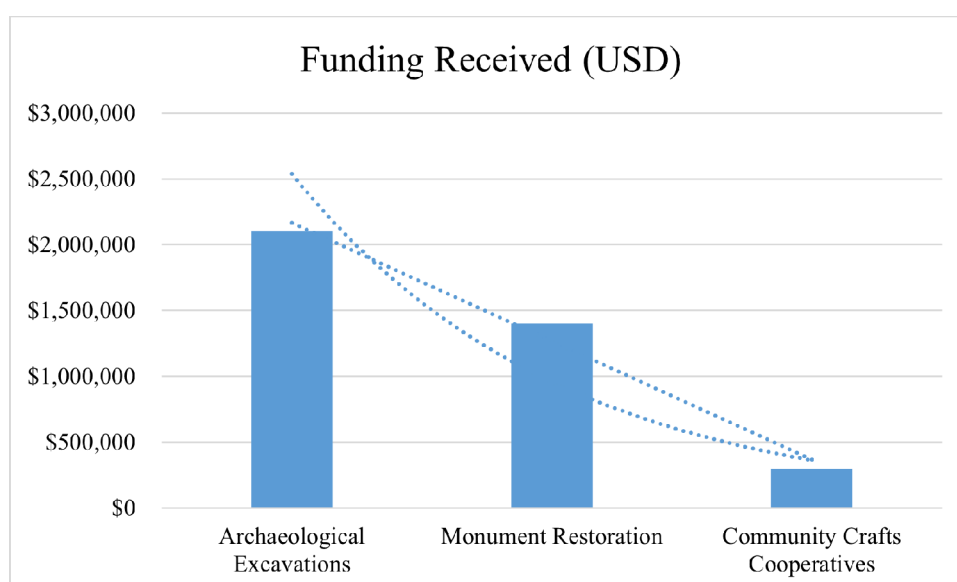


Figure 4. Funding Disparity in Heritage Projects (2018–2023): Women-led community crafts cooperatives, with 98% female participation, received only 12% of total funding

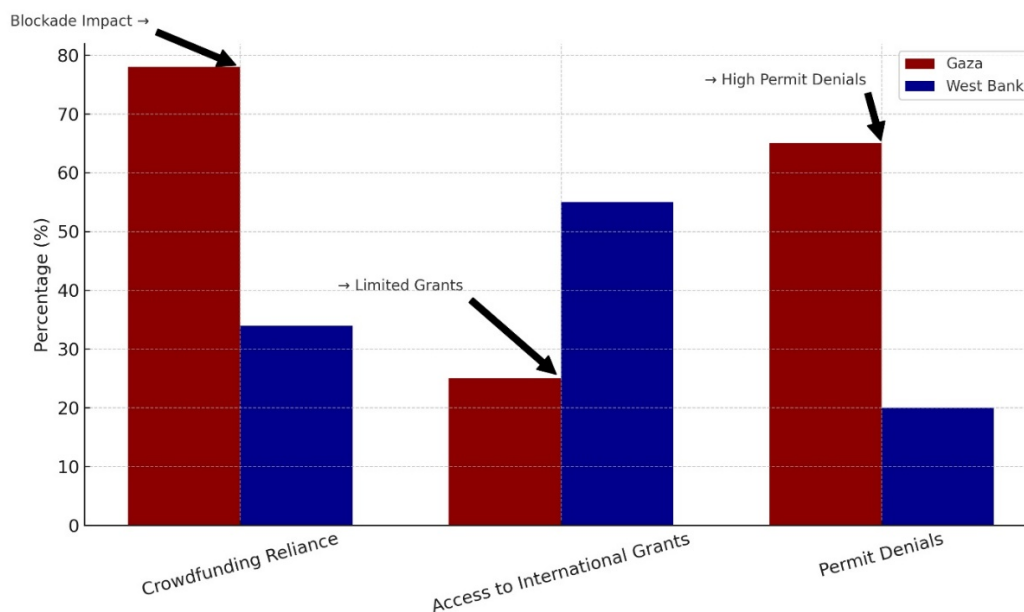


Figure 5. Regional Disparities in Funding Access: Gaza's isolation under blockade exacerbates reliance on grassroots crowdfunding



Figure 6 & 7. Tatreez as a Living Heritage. Left: Traditional motifs from pre-1948 Jerusalem (PHF Archive). Right: Contemporary design integrating nationalist symbols. (RCHP 2023)



Figure 8. Cyclical Process of Heritage Preservation as Resistance: Women's labor sustains cultural memory while forging emancipatory futures

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