

# Education as a Political Practice

## Towards Gender Equality and Social Justice

By Eileen Rizek Kuttab



Women activists neither pause nor wait nor neglect available opportunities or openings for change. They use them, expand them, or create alternative spaces through their daily coping and resistance strategies. Women's struggles against colonialism, patriarchal domination, discrimination, violence, and exploitation extend from home to work, passing through economic, social, legal, and political systems of discrimination, confronting structural as well as cultural obstacles, by opening new boundaries that make opportunities for positive change a reality for all.

As a founding member and current director of the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University, allow me to celebrate women's continuous struggles towards equality and social justice by reminiscing and treasuring Palestinian women's resistance against colonial occupation. I would also like to salute martyrs, prisoners, and activists who resisted and continue to resist occupation and militarization, and honor the women who struggled and continue to struggle against patriarchy and corruption to pave the path to liberation and equality. Let us hope that the future will be free from occupation, violence, discrimination, and injustice, and trust that these struggles will eventually lead to independence, democracy, equality, security, and a just peace.

Let me also celebrate the Institute of Women's Studies on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. I treasure its academic and activist journey that has been filled with challenges, accomplishments, and



*Protest of Union and administration against settlers attempt to enter the University.*

successes. As a woman academic and activist, I remind myself of the various challenges, risks, successes, and failures that women have faced over time in their struggle towards liberation, equality, and justice in occupied Palestine. Recollecting the first Intifada's important successes, I appreciate and miss the approach of the Palestinian women's movement of that time in reaching women at the grassroots level; I value their past ability to mobilize women around an applicable, responsive agenda that has made a difference for all women. Yet I am troubled by the failure of the movement to continue in this spirit. This failure is a result of the professionalization of women's institutions that has created a structural gap between the leadership and the grassroots level and has led to our inability to deal with the new challenges. We now seem to have different priorities. I am hopeful that a genuine effort will be invested to make the struggles of women meaningful for all of us.

At the same time, it is an honor to rejoice in the collective endeavor and the faithful commitment of all founding members and colleagues. As women activists and accomplished academics within Birzeit University, they gathered with a strategic view and a commitment

that have been continuously supported by serious work and quality efforts, which resulted not only in establishing the Institute of Women's Studies, the first university-affiliated center of its kind in the region, but also in making it thrive. This team has recognized its academic and social responsibility, established women's studies as an academic field, and seen the importance of addressing gender issues within our national liberation struggle against colonial occupation. At the same time, the team has been committed to advancing the process of democratic transformation in the ongoing state-building phase in Palestine. The institute and its activities form an important and strategic activist accomplishment and have developed a significant and relevant academic field, engaged local scholarship with global and international scholarship, and created new conceptual and methodological approaches to the understanding of gender within the Palestinian local context, hereby making academia a tool for change. At the same time, let us mention the institute's importance as a conservatory for building the intellectual capacity of both women activists and graduate students. It has been able to incite a good number of women to enroll in graduate programs in order to continue

Higher education must not be turned into a commodity, especially in Palestine where the struggle for political as well as cultural identity is crucial under occupation and globalization. This process has already started, but we hope it will not continue.

Finally and most importantly, the union must strive to maintain the public role of the university.

their academic journey and to attain a master's or doctorate degree and return to the institute as part of a new generation of academics.

On the activist level, I would like to point out that the work of the institute has aimed to develop equitable, gender-aware, and effective policies that address the complex social, economic, cultural, and political difficulties that confront Palestinian women. With its academic minor program in women's studies and the graduate program in gender and development, the institute has succeeded in building the capacity of a large pool of graduates and activists. For their roles within the family, job, and community, they have been conceptually empowered to realize their role in changing gender stereotypes and linking gender equality with women's empowerment at all levels. One of the exiting achievements is that we have been able to mainstream gender within the various faculties of the university. By introducing a course in women's studies we opened spaces for discussions and debates on gender issues in the current transitional stage towards Palestinian statehood.

The work of the institute has touched positively on various governmental and civil society organizations, as well

as regional and global establishments because it represents a window and an eye opener that portrays the issues of Palestinian women in the appropriate context. The realization that Palestinian women are facing different levels of oppression – the occupation constituting national oppression, patriarchal domination constituting the social level, and exploitation and marginalization constituting the economic and class levels – has provided a framework for analysis and practice. All these levels of oppression represent cyclical, structural, and ideological factors that make resistance complicated and challenging. This situation highlights the institute's role in conceptualizing, deconstructing, and revisiting the existing gender issues and concepts via an active and continuous process of academic activism and through genuine moral, ethical, and political commitment. This responsibility has enriched the activist heritage of the institute and stresses the importance of providing an independent academic space, also in relation to donor-driven agendas that sometimes threaten to limit these spaces from growing and developing and attempt to shift national priorities and agendas.

Through my experience as an activist in academia, I realize the importance of considering objectivity and critical analysis as crucial when analyzing gender issues. This objectivity is threatened for various reasons, among them the competition over financial support. In this context, research is expected to respond to international frameworks whose interests are not always in line with local priorities. For instance, limited research is conducted on the impact of adopting neoliberal policies on social-sector policies, as agreed to in the Palestinian National Development plans. More clearly, research on the effects of privatization of social-sector services, such as health and education, or on the commodification of higher education resulting from withdrawal of the role

of the state (PA) in supporting these sectors is unfortunate. As these human sectors are passing through difficult times, the crisis management that is applied through the current adjustment policies and the resulting outcomes pose a large problem for women and the poor. Adjustments in the higher education sector, due to the ongoing financial crisis, may affect academic standards. The development of sectors such as IT and sciences at the expense of social sciences limits spaces for freedom of expression and critical thinking and weakens public intellectuals, as they are replaced by technocrats who emphasize market skills rather than conceptual skills. The result is a drastic change of the role of universities as public institutions. Research has revealed the shortcomings of the private sector's current trend to promote a market economy that focuses on economic sectors such as real estate, banking, and services that are not productive and thus basic, while neglecting or even discouraging investments in productive priority sectors such as agriculture and industry. Furthermore, such practices result in an additional set of problems for women whose enrolment in the labor force has not exceeded 15 percent. Such policies don't expand opportunities for women's employment but keep them outside the formal labor force. Even though productive sectors generate employment and solve the structural problems of unemployment and poverty, these sectors are not emphasized in the current Palestinian development plans or in academic or advocacy research. This neglect not only threatens Palestinian food security and self-reliance, but also marginalizes women even further as it expands the roles of women in the informal economy where neither minimum wage nor social protection are realized. In my opinion, it is extremely important to expose these issues objectively and critically. Is it not the role of research to offer positive change or appropriate solutions for achieving sustainable development?

The General Union of Faculty and Employees of Universities should not only struggle for a better payroll but should also put more weight on academic content such as maintaining academic standards, enhancing political identity, protecting freedom of expression, and building alternative solutions and models for a new way of thinking that can promote a better society.

After having served in Birzeit University for almost 35 years, a group of us, colleagues from the Institute of Women's Studies, decided to address the issue of women's marginalization or misrepresentation in the decision-making circles. The fact that most of the faculty are in the lower academic ranks and administrative organizational pyramid urged us to do a gender audit. As the first initiative of this kind in the region and in an academic institution, the objective was to draw a gender map that locates female employees in all sectors of the institutional hierarchy in order to be able to identify the existing gender gap and its root causes within the context of the existing policies and regulations of the university. The aim of this exercise was to develop gender-mainstreaming tools and to promote gender-specific policies that could bridge the gender gap and transform the university into a more equitable democratic institution. One of the findings that should be emphasized is the fact that neutral laws and regulations are discriminatory against women as they do not take into account the traditional gender division of labor and women's responsibilities and burdens within the households. Gender equality cannot only depend on the efforts of individual women because



Institute founders celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and International Women's Day, 2014.

the situations of women vary, but a better and more feasible policy would be to promote gender-specific policies and laws in addition to gender tools. In this way, procedures and regulations become more gender sensitive and can open real opportunities for all to improve their situations. We believe that we will be able to bridge the gender gap in a responsible, gradual process based on the nature of Birzeit University as a democratic and liberal space, and because its administration has the political will to enhance the position of women.

To conclude, I would like to share an experience that was exciting and rewarding, but also challenging when I was elected as the Head of the Union of Faculty and Employees of Birzeit University from 2011–2013. Together with two women members, we collectively made an effort to change the style and content of the union's work mode. While we achieved only limited success, the experience has enabled us to understand more clearly the political culture of the union work that was loaded with sectarianism and patriarchal attitudes combined with clannish relations. One of the highlights of the experience was to realize and unveil the paradox between slogans of political parties and unions that call for women's representation and their reaction when a woman actually won an election. It exposed the controversy

of the patriarchal culture and heritage of the unions. It was argued that having a woman as head of a union was against tradition. A further justification of the union's objection to the election result was the argument that women have no experience in such a task, even though most of the men who had headed the unions over more than the last decade had not been experienced either. In this context however, I have learned that real women activists should never compromise on filling



and using to the utmost the space that is available to them, and that women who head union work should not delink or fragment components of their struggle. This struggle includes the national and social dimensions that confront them with patriarchal attitudes and clan relations that impact union agreements and affect economic exploitation. Women need to continue their fight for decent work and against marginalization.

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*The IWS Sixth Annual Conference – The Political Field: Between Alienation and Participation, on the occasion of the Institute's 20th anniversary.*