

**Eileen Kuttab,**  
Director of Women Studies Institute at Birzeit University,

# Recounts

**Myriam Sfeir:** When did the Women Studies Institute come about and what are its objectives?

**Eileen Kuttab:** The idea of the Women Studies Institute came as a culmination of a long Palestinian women activism which has developed as an organic component of the national liberation struggle against the Israeli occupation. To make this context clear, it is important to have a brief historical background to tie it to the recent developments. Since the beginning of the century, the Palestinian women's movement emerged as an integral part of the national movement. Different women's institutions have been established to provide basic services to the devastated population as a result of the 1948 and 1967 wars. Most of the services were provided by the women's charitable organizations, led by educated women of the upper classes who adopted a welfare strategy and actively responded to the immediate needs of the political situation.

Two decades following the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, the national struggle witnessed a process of democratization where new organizations were established in order to widen the base of the resistance and involve the different sectors of the society. Different sectors of the society were mobilized mainly students, workers and women, and new mass-based Palestinian national institutions were created to address specific issues and needs of the society in sectors like health, education, agriculture and social services. This process of democratization known as the New Movement, was instrumental in the formation of the women's committees which were led by educated women of the middle class. Although theoretically, the connection between the national and social liberation struggles was made by the women's committees, the complexity of balancing the national and the social agendas while under a colonial/settler occupation was not easy to achieve. The Israeli occupation and its oppressive policies made the implementation of a feasible systematic program impossible. This unholy marriage between feminism and nationalism was further exposed by the Intifada of 1987 as it was obvious that when the Intifada moved away from mass mobilization and activism, the women's movement was marginalized.

The decline of women's broad participation, and women's effectiveness has been analyzed by different scholars and activists and have been attributed to a variety of reasons, including the nature of the Israeli occupier, the male dominant character of the National Movement, the lip service that the political left parties have made towards women and women's issues, and the emergence of the fundamentalist movement which posed a challenge to the social agenda of the National Movement. It was obvious that in the Intifada period, social and gender issues were dealt with with high sensitivity within the national movement which systematically seized the opportunity of promoting the social and gender dimension of the struggle. This situation, posed a variety of challenges on the women's movement, and class and gender issues became more politicized. It is at this stage in the early 1990's that a development of women's consciousness crystallized and expressed itself clearly in a gender context. This gender activism became more visible in the establishment of different platforms like women's research centers, counseling centers, and development centers that integrated gender as a component on their agenda.

In this context, some current members of the Women's Studies Institute constituted the nucleus of some of these centers such as Women's Studies committee at Bisan Research and Development Center in Ramallah which held the first national conference of its kind. It called for the legitimacy of promoting social issues in a national liberation struggle and questioned the nature of the PLO as a male structure which has misrepresented women in its hierarchy, the phenomena of early marriage in the Intifada etc. A second organization is Women's Studies Center in Jerusalem, which has promoted issues like violence against women. These centers dealt for the first time with gender issues in the national liberation struggle like women's representation in the national movement, violence against women, early marriage, female drop-outs from schools ... etc.

After Oslo, and with the establishment of the national authority, the new transitional stage brought new issues to



the forefront. It became clear that the time had come to pressure the adoption of a women's agenda by the Palestinian leadership and make sure that it was responsive to women's needs and requirements. Amidst all these changes and challenges, and with the indefatigable efforts of the women's organizations and women's centers, it was clear that the development of an over-all women's strategy and specific issue-oriented strategies required a new level of research and analysis, as well as consistent and continuous debate and discussion. Responding to the current political changes, and the community needs on one hand, and practicing an academic interest in analyzing some of the theoretical issues concerning gender relations in the region, on the other hand, the Women Studies program was launched at Birzeit University in 1994 by a group of women academicians who were already engaged in research and action on women's issues. Recognizing the need for an academic institute dedicated to teaching, training, and research on gender issues, the women studies was launched at Birzeit University because of its long experience with quality academic performance and democratic heritage that made it the only candidate to umbrella such a serious program that is unique in the Arab world.

The program started in 1994 within the Faculty of Arts offering a minor in Women Studies. In 1996 it was declared to be an independent Women Studies Center directly supervised by the Vice president of Academic Affairs, and in 1998 it was declared an Institute, having fulfilled the requirements according to the by-laws of the university: offering a masters degree in Women Studies. Hence, in addition to teaching undergraduate courses and conducting policy research and gender intervention in community, it has developed its Masters program in Gender, Law and Development, as a basic requirement for becoming an autonomous entity inside the university.

#### Objectives of the Program:

1. Define and develop the field of Women Studies as an Academic field in the Palestinian and Arab society.
2. Increase scientific knowledge on Arab and Palestinian women through research and teaching and developing gender awareness to enable men and women to change their realities.
3. To enable researchers to use analytical skills that can enhance the understanding of gender relationships in Palestinian society.
4. To investigate the complex reality of Palestinian women through research that is action oriented and geared to promote policies for changing the status-quo.
5. To familiarize students and researchers with women's issues and gender relations by expanding their knowledge on other world experiences.
6. To be able to make gender intervention possible in national and international policies that define future gender roles and relationships.

**MS:** How many staff members do you have?

**EK:** The Institute team is an interdisciplinary group coming from different faculties: sociology and anthropology, linguistics and literature, political science, health and journalism. The program's council is made up of nine members, with only four core members who have a full-time status in the program and the rest serving as council members and actively participating in the research and other activities held by the Institute.

**MS:** What kind of students enroll in the program?

**EK:** There are two kinds of students who enroll in the program:

On the undergraduate level, we offer a very popular course entitled "An Introduction to Women Studies" that serves as an elective to the whole university population. Each semester, three to four sections are open to respond to the demand of the students. This course serves as a core course for mainstreaming gender issues in the student's population. It is team taught and it opens the opportunity for a serious debate around most sensitive social issues between female and male students. On average, around 45 students register in each section per semester, 50% of whom are males.

Other courses are given to different students in different departments. In the Sociology department we offer a course entitled "Women in the Arab Society" and it is cross-listed with the sociology department. We also offer a course entitled "Women and Psychology" in the Psychology Department, and it also serves as an elective for the faculty of Arts students. In addition, we offer a course entitled "Women and Discourse or Women in Literature" for students mainly from the English or Arabic departments.

Students register in women studies courses for different reasons: some want to explore the area as an academic field and are curious about the kind of readings and debates that these courses can promote. Others coming basically from traditional settings especially the rural areas want to challenge the issues and ideas promoted by these courses, while others mainly enroll in these courses because the timing happens to suit their program. Whatever the reason, we feel that the course is serving its objective as it opens up the field to an academic debate and promotes the interest of students in the area.

On the Graduate level, our masters program in Gender Development and Law offers its courses to working students who want to enroll in the program because of its direct relation to their profession. They either come from NGO institutions or national bureaus such as the different ministries, or they are independent researchers interested in developing their skills in gender issues. At the same time, the program gives the opportunity to human rights activists who have the legal expertise and would like to join the program. In this manner, it is serving the objective of mainstreaming gender in different areas of expertise and in formal and informal policies. In addition, the program has

developed some conceptual and research skills that can eventually create a network of researchers that can promote successfully social issues with gender perspectives.

**MS:** What are the problems faced by the director and staff?

**EK:** Administrative level:

In the early stage of the program, we faced obstacles such as explaining to the different academic councils at the university the importance of launching Women Studies as an academic field. Despite such problems, there were no real obstacles to impede or delay its establishment, since the administration supported it.

Being an academic institution, it has a strong impact on students and the community in the teaching, research, workshops and seminars it holds at the university, though the structure and bureaucracy of the university pose different levels of problems that are minor in comparison with the benefits. For instance, the heavily male structured bureaucracy can challenge the program in its content and plans and, at the same time, delay the work. Although the university administration encourages the program to respond to community needs and demands which are vast, the structure itself cannot offer effective policies to enable members to cope with the pressure of teaching loads or load reductions, consultancy fees that are competitive to the market prices, and advocacy work such as preparing for workshops, seminars, or support activities for the women's movement.

**Societal Community Level:**

Because the program is one of its kind, and having acquired its academic prestige through quality work and commitment, the market demand to acquire our services is high, which puts the program under too much pressure. The international and national organizations have for the last three years intensified their activity in Palestine around mainstreaming gender in its future plans and strategies. In turn, to respond to the demands of the international donor community which has put gender intervention as a condition for funding, our agenda and our priorities were redefined to cope with this pressure. Although these activities have put more pressure on us, they have exposed us to the outside community, the international programs and plans for Palestine which were gender blind. Such activities like reviewing the World Bank and other international organizations or looking at the ministry's programs gave us the real opportunity to impact national policies that are being formulated and that will define the nature of the future Palestinian state. At this stage, even before the recent "Intifada of Independence" these activities became marginal as most of the plans were not implemented owing to the collapse of the peace process. Hence, we were forced to minimize our input into these activities since it has become obvious that formulating policies on paper is much easier than implementing them under the occupation.

**MS:** What are the courses offered?

**EK:** On the undergraduate level the following courses are offered:

- 1-Introduction to Women Studies
2. Women in the Arab Society
3. Women in the Family
4. Women and Psychology
5. Women and Discourse
6. History of Women's Movements
7. Gender and Development
8. Women and Law
9. Feminist Theories
10. Special Topic
11. Seminar

On the Graduate level the following courses are offered:

1. Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Development
2. Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Law
3. Data collection and Analysis for Gender, Law and Development
4. Local and Regional Dimensions of Gender, Law and Development: Palestine and the Middle East.
5. Sectoral Issues in Development
6. Gender Planning and Policy Intervention
7. Gender, Democratization and Human Rights
8. Gender Law and Economic Relations

**MS:** What are your future plans?

**EK:** To be able to maintain our relatively positive contribution to the political situation, we will be continuing the work at the following levels:

1. Pursue our gender representation in different national and international commissions that produce sensitive reports that impact social development in the future. For instance, we will resume our role in the National Poverty Commission which is conducting a Participatory Poverty Appraisal to be able to define the poverty map of different communities of Palestine within a gender perspective, and be able to make an in-depth analysis of the causes and effects of poverty on the different sectors in order to impact national policies. At the same time, we will continue our active role in producing the annual Human Development Report in Palestine, maintaining gender as a category of analysis ... etc.
2. Prepare for the publication of our book on the "Palestinian Household" which will come out next year. The book is based on a research project that started two years ago by a team of Institute members and some external researchers. The work is trying to define the ongoing coping strategies of the Palestinian household, and the structural and attitudinal changes that occurred in the Palestinian family over a period of time .
3. Assess the new needs of the community and gear research, teaching and gender intervention to suit these needs. Change the theme of our Masters program, and implement an in-depth assessment and analysis.
4. Continue to work with the Palestinian women's movement on achieving a new agenda that copes with the new political and economic realities and builds strategies for achieving development for all.