NWSA Recommits to BDS and Feminist Accountability

“To face the realities of our lives is not a reason for despair—despair is a tool of your enemies. Facing the realities of our lives gives us motivation for action.”
—Audre Lorde, Oberlin College Commencement Address (1989)

“There is shit among us we need to sift through. Who knows, there may be some fertilizer in it [...] We are not going to cut through la mierda by sweeping the dirt under the rug.”
—Gloria Anzaldúa, “En rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando cuentas a las nuestras” (1990)

Building on decades of Palestinian anti-colonial liberation movement and inspired by the South African anti-Apartheid movement in the 1980s, over 175 Palestinian organizations officially called for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel in July 2005. On the heels of a brutal bombardment of Gaza, when the Israeli army killed more than 2,000 people, many of our members issued a petition calling on the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA or the Association) to adopt a BDS resolution during our annual conference in 2014. While the petition was signed by nearly 1,000 members, an official stance was not adopted due to Association bylaws. That changed the following year. Led by Dr. Rabab Abdulhadi and others, several members presented a resolution for consideration during our annual conference in Milwaukee, WI. The resolution passed and was followed by the formation of NWSA's Feminists for Justice In/For Palestine Caucus (F4JP) and an official statement from President Vivian M. May and the Governing Council (or Board) calling for the “support of academic freedom, political dissent, and the pursuit of education and research without undue state interference or repression.”

Shortly before our annual conference in 2022, President and Interim Executive Director Karsonya Wise Whitehead visited Israel “for religious and familial reasons.” While she issued an initial apology and released statements on Palestine, early communiqués fell short of demonstrating an understanding about the ways colonial and religious tourism fuels Christian Zionism and committing to accountability for complicity with Israeli colonization. For example, the impetus for the justifiable outrage expressed by members of F4JP, as well as numerous Palestinian and non-Palestinian members, was situated as a mere “difference in perception.” However, that outrage was not a result of differences in perception. Rather, that outrage was catalyzed by solidarity with people struggling against
colonization, military occupation, and indigenous genocide.

Nevertheless, members of F4JP maintained a steadfast commitment to continued collaboration with NWSA, evidenced by their statement “Call on NWSA to Reaffirm Its Unwavering Commitment to Palestinian Liberation and Feminism, including BDS,” which offered myriad ways NWSA could collaboratively commit to accountability, such as a sponsored delegation to Palestine and a plenary and teaching institute focused on Palestine. These and other calls for accountability were largely ignored or met with hostility and coupled with a lack of transparency regarding decision-making related to these and other harms caused.

The Board issued nearly 30 statements during President Whitehead’s term, including one calling for Purdue University Northwest Chancellor Thomas L. Keon to be held accountable for racism and another calling for the Indiana University School of Medicine and the University of Notre Dame to be held accountable for anti-abortion stances. However, we never published a statement calling for accountability within our own ranks regarding our commitment to justice in and for Palestine. For example, our May 2023 statement commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Nakba fell short not only in its content but in the curation of the statement itself. NWSA failed to meaningfully consult with Palestinian intellectuals within (and beyond) the membership before publishing, and as a result, BDS was misnamed, and the apartheid occupation of Palestine was referenced as the “annexing of Palestinian land.” Similarly, our July 2023 newsletter egregiously conflated anti-Zionism and antisemitism. F4JP then withdrew from our 2023 conference, and a number of our members withdrew in solidarity and protest, resulting in a vacuum of Palestinian-centered sessions. The two subsequent statements issued by the Association, one calling for “a Ceasefire and Negotiations to End Gaza Siege and Israeli Apartheid” and another calling for “an End to Israel’s War on Gaza,” were too little, too late.

As soon as she assumed leadership during the 2023 conference, then President-Elect Heidi R. Lewis contacted F4JP in an effort to recommit the Association to BDS and feminist accountability. In January 2024, F4JP met with President Lewis, Interim Executive Director Kristian Contreras, and the Board to share concerns about the Baltimore conference. For example, the genocidal war on Gaza was only mentioned at the end of the opening plenary in a video submitted by Dr. Angela Y. Davis. We also learned of even more harms done, including portraits of Golda Meir displayed by the officially-contracted hotel during our conference in Milwaukee and the removal of Dr. Abdulhadi from the NWSA website as F4JP Co-Chair in 2022. The latter was particularly disturbing, given how much Dr. Abdulhadi, a longtime and renowned organizer, activist, scholar, and professor, has

April 30, 2024
committed her time, energy, and labor to the Association.

Fortunately, we learned several F4JP suggestions for accountability were congruent with President Lewis’s existing plans for collaboratively addressing and repairing these and other harms. Shortly after the aforementioned meeting, President Lewis published her two-year strategic plan, “Reconnect, Repair, Restore: A More Thoughtful, Transparent, and Trustworthy NWSA.” She introduced it, in part, by acknowledging the violation of BDS and taking accountability for her part in exacerbating these and other harms as NWSA Secretary (2021-23). As content leader for our upcoming conference in Detroit, MI, President Lewis committed to a plenary focused on Palestine and a presidential session focused on transnational feminist analyses of imperialism, war, and occupation. She also designated Imperialism, War, and Occupation; Transnational Feminisms; and Decolonial Theory and Praxis as conference sub-themes, along with naming Huwaida Arraf as a Conference Co-Chair. President Lewis, Interim Executive Director Contreras, and members of the Governing Council have also supported the academic freedom of myriad individuals and collectives calling for a ceasefire, including the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at Syracuse University, Scholars Against the War on Palestine, Rising Majority, and the Palestinian Feminist Collective, and have advocated for our colleagues under attack, such as Dr. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, who was recently reinstated after staunch organizing on her behalf and then arrested by Israeli police. Last, but not least, President Lewis published her inaugural presidential blog, “Palestine and the Black Radical Intellectual Tradition,” which was derived from remarks she gave during a teach-in at Colorado College organized by her colleague Dr. Nadia Guessous. President Lewis’s blog was enthusiastically received by F4JP and its members, who amplified it on all social media platforms to draw attention to the significance of a statement on Black-Palestinian solidarities.

Yet, and as always, there is more work to do. Guided by our many conversations with F4JP, conversations with our broader membership, and our shared principles, we commit to the following:

- a plenary focused on Palestine and a presidential session focused on transnational feminisms during the 2024 conference in Detroit that account for communities that have been marginalized by NWSA leadership;
- an NWSA delegation to Palestine to be co-organized with Dr. Abdulhadi before the end of President Lewis’s term;
- an Institute for Teaching Gender and Sexual Justice in Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian Communities;

April 30, 2024
- a webinar focused on Gaza and coalition-building to be co-organized with F4JP before the Detroit conference;
- a series of virtual teach-ins organized by F4JP that will be co-sponsored by NWSA;
- and episodes of Feminist Frequencies focused on Black-Arab solidarities to be co-organized with Dr. Dana Olwan and the Black/Arab Relationalities Initiative and on Palestine as a Feminist Issue to be co-organized with F4JP, respectively.

Above all else, we remain committed to building and maintaining thoughtful, transparent, and trustworthy relationships, especially but not only in times of crisis.

We understandably grow weary from routinely studying and resisting sexism, racism, transantagonism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. Still, these systems exist and continue to adversely impact our lives and the well-being of our communities. We, therefore, maintain this commitment with as much joy and enthusiasm as we can muster, because we remember what Grace Lee Boggs taught us, “Movements are born of critical connections rather than critical mass.” In this vein, we sit with the complexity of what repair and true solidarity looks like—not just in abstraction but in practice. Rather than moving with a sense of urgency with regard to public image, NWSA is invested in the principles of feminist work that prioritize our relationships with our comrades and sibling communities. With a sense of urgency to respond to and stop the current Israeli genocide in Gaza, as well as the need to listen, discuss, and engage in long-term and deep solidarities, we engage with accountability and intentionality in lieu of short-term gains and quick fixes.

In solidarity,

The National Women’s Studies Association

April 30, 2024