

## Another Association Backs Israel Boycott

The National Women's Studies Association becomes the latest scholarly group to join the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel.

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136 COMMENTS

The National Women's Studies Association is the newest scholarly group to back the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel.

In a vote that involved 35 percent of the association's total membership, 88.4 percent, or 653 individuals, voted in favor of a boycott measure. Members of the NWSA's executive committee then took their own vote on Friday to approve the membership's recommendation that the association support BDS.

The NWSA measure does not limit itself to a boycott just of Israeli academic institutions, but rather affirms the association's endorsement of "the 2005 call by Palestinian civil society for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) of economic, military and cultural entities and projects sponsored by the state of Israel."

Simona Sharoni, one of the co-founders of Feminists for Justice in/for Palestine, an ad-hoc group that sponsored the pro-boycott measure, described the NWSA vote in support of BDS as significant in positioning Palestinian solidarity as a "feminist issue." The text of the recommendation approved by the membership states, in part: "As feminist scholars, activists, teachers and public intellectuals we recognize the interconnectedness of systemic forms of oppression. In the spirit of this intersectional perspective, we cannot overlook the injustice and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, perpetrated against Palestinians and other Arabs in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, within Israel and in the Golan Heights, as well as the colonial displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the 1948 Nakba." ("Nakba" is the term used by Palestinians to describe their displacement by the creation of the state of Israel.)

"We're basically redefining feminism and putting solidarity with Palestine into that definition of what it means to be a feminist," said Sharoni, a professor of gender and women's studies at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. "Or, to put it differently, the vote of almost 90 percent of the members of the National Women's Studies Association in support of this resolution underscores the fact that boycott, divestment and sanctions can be or is seen by members of our association as an example of expressing feminist solidarity."

BDS supporters within the NWSA described BDS as reflecting “a commitment to the indivisibility of justice” and used language that was notably more charged than that which was common in boycott-related discussions at last month’s American Anthropological Association meeting, where attendees voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution to boycott Israeli academic institutions. (That resolution now goes to the full membership of the AAA for a vote.)

In a press release with quotes from BDS supporters, Rabab Abdulhadi, an associate professor of race and resistance studies at San Francisco State University, described the NWSA resolution as being “a long time in the making; it reflects broader changes within NWSA, especially the browning [and the radicalization] of the organization and the challenges it waged against white supremacy [and neoliberalism] which went hand in hand with Zionist influence in the women’s movement and women’s and feminist scholarship.” In an interview, Abdulhadi -- who amended the quote as written in the press release to include the phrases included in brackets -- said she was speaking of dominant, "hegemonic" voices within the women's movement that elevated Israel as a paragon for gender equality within the Middle East while erasing, or "invisibilizing," Palestine.

About half a dozen U.S.-based scholarly associations in the social sciences and humanities have endorsed the BDS movement since 2013, the largest of these being the American Studies Association. Opponents of boycotts argue that they undercut core values of academic freedom and free exchange, and the American Association of University Professors is opposed to organized academic boycotts for this reason.

Janet Freedman, a resident scholar at Brandeis University’s Women’s Studies Research Center, spoke against the boycott at the recent NWSA conference in Milwaukee and penned a piece that appeared Monday in the Jewish Daily Forward. In that piece she writes among other things of “the egregious assault on academic freedom found in the explication in the FAQs of activities that would violate the boycott.” The FAQ includes the following question and answer sequence:

Q: “What are some examples of activities that would violate an academic/cultural boycott? For example, would an invitation to an Israeli colleague to give a seminar talk on my campus cross the line? What about calling her or him on the phone?”

A: “A seminar talk in partnership with or sponsored by an Israeli institution is subject to boycott. Free of complicit institutional sponsorship or funding, Israeli academic talks are not subject to boycott. By itself, a phone conversation with an Israeli academic does not constitute a violation of the boycott. However, institutional partnership is subject to boycott; therefore, we urge academics, in exercising their own academic freedoms, to refuse all collaboration with complicit institutions and their official representatives.”

In an interview, Freedman, who described herself as “pro-peace,” “pro-Israel,” “pro-Palestine” and as “progressive in my politics,” said she sees the BDS resolution as “inimical” to the peace process and a two-state solution. “I don’t want to be a pariah and seen as on the 'evil' side of an issue that doesn’t have two sides,” she said. “It has 1,000 different points of complexity.”

Samuel M. Edelman, the executive director of Academic Council for Israel, a new organization that Edelman said has faculty membership at more than 100 universities in the U.S., described the NWSA measure as a “one-sided indictment of Israel.”

“I feel like I’m in Alice in Wonderland here,” he said. “One of the only places in the Middle East that embraces the feminist ideal, has embedded it within the very structures of the government and education and public policy, is attacked while the rest of the Middle East, which does none of that, is ignored.”

The boycott measure follows on a solidarity statement the NWSA issued in January after a plenary at the 2014 conference “wherein there was a strong show of support by a majority of more than 1,000 plenary attendees” for BDS.

“NWSA, the organization, has been engaged in the issue for more than a year,” said Allison Kimmich, the association's executive director. She said the association has not yet resolved questions of how it will implement the boycott.

The association’s president, Vivian M. May, said in a statement that “the association's members are committed to an inclusive feminist vision, to contesting structural inequities on multiple fronts, and are deeply engaged in anticolonial, antiwar and anti-imperialist feminist scholarship, teaching and activism.”

May, who teaches at Syracuse University, added: “Given these commitments, next year's conference in Montreal shall be timely for the field, and for NWSA as it continues to grow, with 'Decoloniality' as the overarching conference theme.”