

From Presence to Power: Female Agency in the Palestinian Student Movement

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Abstract

This article examines the persistent underrepresentation of female students in the Palestinian student movement, despite their numerical majority in higher education. Using a mixed-methods approach – combining archival analysis, unstructured interviews with current and former activists, and critical engagement with existing scholarship – the study investigates the structural, ideological, and historical factors that shape women's political participation. Introducing the concept of progressive deprivation, adapted from Ted Robert Gurr's theory of relative deprivation, the article argues that female students experience a widening gap between rising educational and political capacities and constrained opportunities for institutional leadership. Focusing on the Islamic Bloc as a case study, it traces the evolution of women's sectors, internal organizational practices, and factional dynamics that influence female engagement in student councils. The findings reveal uneven but growing forms of activism through conferences, committee work, and grassroots initiatives, highlighting how female students negotiate, challenge, and seek to transform gendered boundaries within the Palestinian student movement.

Keywords: Student movement; the Islamic Bloc; female activists; progressive deprivation; Palestine

Received: 13.06.2025 | Accepted: 18.12.2025 | DOI: 10.47932/ortetut.1745945

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Mevcudiyetten Güce: Filistin Öğrenci Hareketinde Kadın Öznelliği

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Özet

Bu makale, Filistin'de yükseköğretimde sayısal çoğunluğu oluşturmalarına rağmen kadın öğrencilerin Filistin öğrenci hareketi içindeki düşük temsiline odaklanmaktadır. Arşiv taraması, mevcut ve eski aktivistlerle yapılan yapılandırılmamış mülakatlar ve mevcut literatürle eleştirel etkileşimi bir araya getiren karma yöntemli bir araştırma tasarımıyla, kadınların siyasal katılımını şekillendiren yapısal, ideolojik ve tarihsel etkenler incelenmektedir. Gurr'un göreceli yoksunluk kuramından uyarlanarak geliştirilen ilerleyici yoksunluk kavramı çerçevesinde makale, kadın öğrencilerin artan eğitimsel ve siyasal kapasiteleri ile kurumsal liderlik olanaklarının sınırlılığı arasında giderek açılan bir uçurum deneyimlediklerini ileri sürmektedir. Bir vaka çalışması olarak İslami bloka odaklanan çalışma, kadın kollarının evrimini, iç örgütsel uygulamaları ve öğrenci konseylerindeki kadın katılımını etkileyen fraksiyonel dinamikleri izlemektedir. Bulgular; konferanslar, komite çalışmaları ve taban girişimleri aracılığıyla eşitsiz fakat artan aktivizm biçimlerini ortaya koymakta; kadın öğrencilerin Filistin öğrenci hareketi içindeki cinsiyetlendirilmiş sınırları nasıl müzakere ettiklerini, bu sınırları nasıl sorguladıklarını ve dönüştürmeye çalıştıklarını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öğrenci Hareketi, İslami Blok, Kadın Aktivistler, İlerleyici Yoksunluk, Filistin

Geliş Tarihi: 13.06.2025 | Kabul Tarihi: 18.12.2025 | DOI: 10.47932/ortetut.1745945

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من الحضور إلى القوة: الذاتية النسائية في الحركة الطلابية الفلسطينية

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ملخص

يركز هذا المقال على ضعف تمثيل الطالبات في الحركة الطلابية الفلسطينية على الرغم من كونهن يشكلن الأغلبية العددية في التعليم العالي في فلسطين. وتتناول الدراسة العوامل البنوية والأيدولوجية والتاريخية التي تشكل المشاركة السياسية للمرأة، وذلك من خلال منهجية بحثية متعددة الأساليب تجمع البحث الأرشيفي والمقابلات غير المهيكلة مع ناشطات حاليات وسابقات إضافة إلى التحليل النقدي للأدبيات الموجودة. وفي إطار مفهوم الحرمان التقدمي المقتبس من نظرية غور للحرمان النسبي، فإن المقال يظهر أن الطالبات يواجهن فجوة متزايدة الاتساع بين قدراتهن التعليمية والسياسية المتصاعدة، وتقييد فرصهن في احتمالية تولي مناصب قيادية مؤسسية. ومن خلال التركيز على الكتلة الإسلامية كدراسة حالة، فإن المقال يتناول تطور فروع الحركة النسائية، والممارسات التنظيمية الداخلية، والديناميات الفئوية التي تؤثر على مشاركة المرأة في المجالس الطلابية. وتكشف النتائج عن أشكال غير متكافئة لكنها متصاعدة من الفعاليات من خلال المؤتمرات والعمل في اللجان والمبادرات على مستوى القاعدة؛ وهذا يظهر كيف تواجه الطالبات قيود وضعهن في حدود جنسهن كونهن سيدات داخل الحركة الطلابية الفلسطينية وكيف تسعى الطالبات لتغيير هذه الحدود.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحركة الطلابية، الكتلة الإسلامية، الناشطات السيدات، الحرمان التقدمي، فلسطين

تاريخ الاستلام: 13.06.2025 | تاريخ القبول: 18.12.2025 | DOI: 10.47932/ortetut.1745945

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Introduction

Although females represent more than 61% of students in Palestinian higher education institutions, they constitute less than 5% of heads of student councils in universities and less than 32% of student council members during the same period. This article aims to examine the hypothesis that female students are underrepresented in student councils by questioning the empirical data and seeking to explain the gap between women's presence in the educational field and their representation in the administrative bodies of the Palestinian student movement.

Research on Palestinian women's political engagement provides essential context for understanding gender dynamics within the contemporary student movement. Islah Jad's comprehensive study *Women at the Crossroads* offers one of the most important analyses of Palestinian women's activism from the British Mandate period to the post-Oslo era. Jad illustrates how Palestinian women's movements have long navigated dual and often contradictory roles: on one hand, they are mobilized as symbols of national struggle, sacrifice, and collective identity; on the other, they confront structural constraints that limit their political agency within patriarchal institutions and factional structures. She shows that women's roles in Palestinian political organizations – whether nationalist, leftist, or Islamist – are neither predetermined nor fixed but evolve in response to changes in national politics, social expectations, and movement identities. Notably, Jad highlights how the rise of Islamic activism in the 1980s and 1990s transformed gender discourse in Palestinian society by reshaping women's participation through new structures, including student-based organizing. Her analysis of the Islamic women's movement underscores how female Islamists in Palestine strategically negotiate between doctrinal commitments, social conservatism, and practical political engagement, thereby contesting simplistic binaries between “secular feminists” and “Islamist women.”¹

This larger body of Palestinian scholarship has documented how gender has been historically marginalized in the student movement. Heba Yazbik's work demonstrates that Palestinian student factions, mirroring their parent political organizations, prioritize national and ideological agendas at the expense of gender issues, resulting in the systematic sidelining of women's demands. Research on women in Israeli universities similarly reveals that gender representation remains limited, even in institutions where stu-

1 Islah Jad, *Palestinian Women's Activism: Nationalism, Secularism, Islamism* (Syracuse UP, 2018).

dent activism is robust. Within Palestinian universities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, female students have long been active organizers, campaigners, and mobilizers; yet their presence in formal leadership structures remains inconsistent and often symbolic. The roles assigned to women tend to be peripheral, confined to social, cultural, or public relations committees rather than positions of strategic or decision-making power.²

At the regional level, scholarship on Islamist women's activism during and after the Arab Spring further enriches the understanding of gendered political engagement. Research on Islamist women across thirteen Arab countries shows that women's political participation within Islamic movements did not emerge spontaneously during the revolutions; rather, it resulted from cumulative institutional transformations within these movements from the early 2000s onward. These transformations enabled women to engage in electoral politics, occupy leadership positions, and participate in movement-wide mobilization efforts despite persistent ideological constraints. Yet, these shifts were largely incremental and uneven. Many of the women interviewed experienced what is theorized as *progressive deprivation*: their expectations for expanded roles grew considering their long-term activism and increased qualifications, but institutional responses, particularly at senior decision-making levels, did not keep pace with these rising expectations.³

Despite this existing scholarship, a significant gap remains: no empirical study has systematically examined Palestinian female students as political actors within university-based factions, nor has research analyzed how internal movement structures, such as women's committees, sectoral conferences, and training networks, shape women's participation from within. Moreover, the existing literature does not connect the historical evolution of Palestinian women's activism to contemporary student-based mobilization, nor does it explicitly link Palestinian student activism to regional patterns in Islamist women's political engagement. This article addresses these gaps.

This study makes three major contributions. First, it provides the first systematic empirical analysis of female activists within the Islamic Bloc in

2 Hiba Yazbek, *Tamthīl al-Nisā' wa Qadāyahūn fī al-'Amal al-Tullābī al-Filisīnī fī al-Jāmi'āt al-'Isrā'īliyyah*, (Dirāsāt, 2012), 62, <http://www.dirasat-aclp.org/arabic/files/kitab2012-dirasat-8.pdf>

3 Dalal Bajes and Mehmet Rakipoglu, "Islamist Women in Arab Spring Countries: Inquiries into Structural Changes within Islamic Movements," *Hawwa Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* (forthcoming).

Palestinian universities. Drawing on archival materials from multiple universities, unstructured interviews with former and current activists, and internal movement documents, this article reconstructs the organizational, ideological, and structural conditions that shape women's participation in student politics.

Second, it introduces the concept of progressive deprivation, adapted from Ted Robert Gurr but developed through prior research on Islamist women, to explain the persistent gap between female students' growing educational, organizational, and political capacities and the limited institutional opportunities available to them within student councils. This theoretical contribution offers a new lens for analyzing gender disparities in student movements and Islamic movements alike.

Third, by situating Palestinian female student activism within both the national history of Palestinian women's political participation and the transnational transformations of Islamist women's mobilization, the article bridges two bodies of literature that are rarely connected. It demonstrates that the dynamics affecting female students in Palestinian universities are not isolated phenomena but are part of broader ideological, organizational, and sociopolitical trends across Arab Islamic movements.

In this article, it is argued that women within the Palestinian student movement are experiencing progressive deprivation, a phenomenon in which both value expectations and value capabilities are increasing. However, value capabilities have neither kept pace with value expectations nor experienced a sudden decline.⁴

The main research questions are: Are female students in the Palestinian student movement aware of the consequences of their underrepresentation? What actions are they taking to try to change this situation? By relying on Gurr's theory of relative deprivation, as outlined in his book *Why Men Rebel?* it is aimed to describe the position and situation of female students within the Palestinian student movement.

The article will highlight the role of female students in the Palestinian student movement, taking the Islamic Bloc (al-Kutla al-Islamiyah - IB) as a case study. It will examine the historical background of the establishment of female sectors within the student movement in general, and within the IB in particular. Subsequently, their representation within the organizational structures of the student movement will be analyzed, followed by an ex-

4 Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel?* (Gulf Research Center, 2004).

amination of their representation within the student councils. Finally, the article will highlight their initiatives and actions aimed at enhancing their empowerment within the student movement.

The Role of Female Students in the Palestinian Student Movement

Female student participation in syndicate work within Palestinian universities varies across student factions in terms of planning, implementation, and media exposure. Their representation within the organizational structures of these factions also differs. However, this variation remains limited to one domain: the constrained role that female students in all student movements are generally permitted to occupy within the political and syndicate arenas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Little has changed regarding female representation in the Palestinian student movement throughout historic Palestine. In a study conducted by Yazbik on the representation of women and women's issues within Palestinian student work in Israeli universities, she describes the reality of the student movement as one that prioritizes national and identity issues over social demands, gender concerns, and gender equality. She observes: "Since its inception, the student movement has chosen to be active in general political matters as well as issues of syndicate demands, in a similar vein as national parties. This has led to the natural and direct cloning of existing parties' agendas and effective political representative frameworks. This marginalization of gender issues and women's roles in politics was not only highlighted in the general political arena. Still, it was also reflected within the ranks of the student movement, which refused to take the pioneering role of social emancipation. Instead, it allowed itself to interact functionally and harmoniously with what existed and was available."⁵

Conversely, since its foundation in 1980, the IB incorporated an independent female student body into its organizational structure, known as the *al-Hara'er* ("the Free Women") sector. In terms of functional responsibilities, this group was – at least theoretically – equivalent to the male student body. The *al-Hara'er* sector consisted of the Shura Council, as mentioned previously, in addition to *Lagnat al-Masjid*, the IB's higher administrative body, and *al-Amira*, the head of the female sector. Since its inception, the IB female sector has been regarded as the most broadly effective and best-organized female sector.

⁵ Yazbek, *Tamthīl al-Nisā' wa Qadāyahūn*, 62,

In the 1990s, the IB reserved around 10% of its membership allotment in the Student Council Assembly for its female members.⁶ Starting in 2012, the IB has increased the representation of female students in the Student Council Assembly to 30%.⁷ In 2015, the IB reserved 50% of the General Student Council for its female members.

The Shabiba FYM encompasses a female group called *Akhawat Dalal*⁸ (“The Sisters of Dalal”), which has been active since the mid-nineties. Still, becoming more distinguished and prominent after 2006, it inherently includes all female supporters and members of the Shabiba. According to the Shabiba coordinator at Birzeit University, females constitute about 25% to 30% of the top-level leadership within the movement.⁹

Nonetheless, there does not seem to be a guaranteed ratio within the internal regulations of the Shabiba that determines their female members’ right to a specific share of leadership positions. This has led to their complete absence in certain leadership positions, such as the Student Council Assembly, as well as the Student Council at Birzeit University in 2015. Hence, the Shabiba has not nominated female members for 51 Student Council Assembly positions.

Regarding the Qutub, it did not have an independent female representative body. Instead, female members were present at all leadership levels of the movement. They existed alongside their male counterparts, without being specifically restricted in their participation. This has been the case since the movement’s inception. They have participated in the Student Council Assembly, the Qutub’s direct electoral body, and the “committee,” which is considered the top administrative framework within the Qutub.

Qutub female activists confirm the prevalence of gender equality among Pole members on all levels and within all student representative bodies. Activist Email Correspondent E2 states:

According to the Pole’s internal regulations, being elected to any of the Pole’s bodies is the right of every male and female student. Normally, there is a 50/50 chance for men and women; however, nowadays, the percentage of elected females has surpassed that of their male counterparts.

6 *Islamic Bloc in an-Najah University, You Ask and the Islamic Bloc Answers*, 1997, An-Najah Library Archive, Nablus, Palestine. Interviewee I1, interview with author, Ramallah, March 2012.

7 Interviewee I2, interview with author, Hebron, September 2015. Interviewee I3, interview with author, Ramallah, September 2015.

8 Referring to Dalal al-Mughraby, leader of a Palestinian militant cell under the PLO.

9 Email Correspondent E1, email message to author, May 2015.

This is also the case for the 51 Student Council Assembly members, for whom the Student Pole usually designates an equal list of male and female comrades. Furthermore, the Student Pole Secretary position was sometimes held by a young man, while at other times it was occupied by a young woman. Candidates were selected according to their leadership ability. During the election campaign, the debate usually consists of two people: a young man and a young woman. This is also true in the case of the electoral debate, where the Student Pole is represented by both a young man and a young woman.¹⁰

Female Student Representation in the Student Councils

Regarding female student representation within the Student Councils at Palestinian universities, their participation as members of the extended Student Council Assembly or as members of the Student Councils' Secretariats (at all Palestinian universities) was inconsistent with their numbers and physical presence at these universities. Moreover, it did not align with their role in the student resource mobilization process.¹¹

The IB at Hebron University had on its first electoral list, in 1980-1981, two women, Jamila Jaber and Taghreed Al-Junaidi. They became members of the Student Council, which consisted of nine members and was headed by Aqil Rabe. ¹²

In fact, after that year, the female student representation in the Student Councils at Hebron University ceased to exist. Moreover, female students were not nominated for Student Council positions by any of the student bodies until 2015.¹³ This was, for instance, the case during 2008, 2013, and 2014 when female students carried out a Council task each year under the title of "Council Member," although they were not included in the Council's official formation.¹⁴

At Hebron Polytechnic University, female students have participated in the Student Councils for only three years since the university's foundation. A female student, for instance, chaired a Council session, as a representative of the FYM, in 2006. Moreover, female students chaired two Student Council

10 Email Correspondent E2, email message to author, May 2015.

11 Interviewee I2, interview.

12 Dalal Bajes, *Al-Ḥaraka al-Ṭullābiyya al-'Islāmiyya fī Filasṭīn: Al-Kutla al-'Islāmiyya Namūdhajan* (Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, 2012), 25.

13 Archival observation within the Islamic Bloc Archive, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine, done by the author.

14 Interviewee I2, interview.

sessions in 2007, also as representatives of the FYM. However, the presence of female students in the Student Council was interrupted until 2015, when three IB female students took charge of the Financial, Social, and Cafeteria Committees.¹⁵

At al-Quds University, the Student Council was historically under the chairmanship of the IB from its inception in 1984 until 2004. Each year, the IB nominates two female students for membership in the Consolidated Council representing the university's major colleges: Science and Technology, Law, and Literature. Female students sometimes took charge of local Student Councils, which pertained to the colleges and were called "clubs," especially in the Science and Technology and Literature departments.¹⁶ After 2004, the IB lost its position as Council Chair, thus playing only a minimal part in the election process. Furthermore, female students have not chaired any council committees since that year.

At Al-Najah University, the IB list in the first proportional elections included ten girls, out of eighty-one students.¹⁷ Regarding female representation in the Student Council versus the Student Council General Assembly, female students have not participated in the Student Council since the university's inception, except for two times as representatives of the Shabiba, in 1986 and 1994. Another female student ran for election on behalf of the Shabiba in 1995 but lost.¹⁸

In a booklet published in 1997, the IB stated that its objection to the membership of female students in the Al-Najah University Student Council was due to security and social issues related to fear of prosecution and detention. When these conditions were no longer a threat, it no longer objected to the nomination of women for this position.¹⁹ However, this edict has not been applied since it was passed in 1997. Instead, their participation in the Council was replaced with what is known as the Female Students' Committee in the Council, which typically consisted of a group of female students whose names were listed in the General Conference of the Student Council, and they coordinated female students in particular.²⁰

In 2014, a female student, Bahader Rizq Allah, representing the Shabiba in

15 Interviewee I2, interview.

16 Interviewee I4, interview with author, Hebron, September 2015.

17 *Islamic Bloc in an-Najah University*, 6.

18 Fathi Khader, *Dawr al-Ḥaraka al-Ṭullābiyya fi Jāmi'at al-Najāh al-Waṭaniyya fi Tarsikh Mafhūm al-Mushāraka al-Siyāsiyya, 1994–2000* (Al-Najah National University, 2008), 148.

19 *Islamic Bloc in an-Najah University*, 6.

20 Bajes, *Al-Ḥaraka al-Ṭullābiyya*, 86.

the Tul Karim branch of Al-Quds Open University, won the position of Student Council President for the first time in the university's history. The position was won without elections, but through an internal mutual agreement within the ranks of the Shabiba. She served as a Student Youth administrative body member and the coordinator for the Sisters of Dalal at the university; she was previously the Council's Public Relations Coordinator.²¹ As of 2007, Student Council elections in all Al-Quds Open University branches have stopped due to the Palestinian division.

As for Birzeit University, considered the university with the highest female student representation, the Student Council witnessed the presidency of one female student, Maha Nassar, in 1974, representing the Qutub, before becoming a fully-functional university.²² Out of eleven students, two to three female students almost always participate in each Student Council session.

However, committees headed by these female students are confined to the following: Public Relations, as well as the Cultural, Social, Art, Health and Environment, and Collaborative Work Committees. Female students have never chaired any of the significant or commanding committees within the Student Council, such as the Student Council Presidency, the Financial or the Disciplinary Committees, and they have served as Head of the Sports Committee only once, in 1993.²³

The following table illustrates the number of female students participating in the Birzeit University Student Councils, and their distribution among student bodies between 1996 and 2017.²⁴

21 "bihadir rizq allah tatara'as majlis talabat alquds almaftuhat fi Tulkarm," Nawa, 7 May, 2013, <https://nawa.ps/ar/post/3409>.

22 Email Correspondent E2, email message.

23 Hasan Obaid and Dalal Bajes, *Majālis al-Ṭalaba wa al-Nizām al-Siyāsī al-Filīstīnī: Jāmi' at al-Ḍaffa al-Gharbiyya Namūdhajan*, (Nama' Center for Research and Studies, 2015), <http://www.nama-center.com/ImagesGallary/photoGallary/pdf/14R%20P56.pdf>

24 Obaid and Bajes, *Majālis al-Ṭalaba wa al-Nizām*.

Table 1. The number of female students who participated in the Birzeit University Student Councils.²⁵

Year	IB	Shabiba	Qutub	IL	Independent	Percentage of Female Students Participating in the Student Council
1996-1997	2	2	1	-		45%
1997-1998	1			-		
1998-1999	1			-		
1999-2000	1			-		
2003-2004	1	0	1	0	-	18%
2004-2005	1	0	1	-		18%
2006-2007	2	-	-	1	1	36%
2007-2008	1	0	0	-		9%
2008-2009	1	1	0	-		18%
2009-2010	-	2	-	-		18%
2010-2011	-	2	-	-		18%
2011-2012	-	1	-	-		9%
2012-2013	-	1	-	-		9%
2013-2014	1	1	1	-		27%
2014-2015	1	1	1	-		27%
2015-2016	2	0	0	-	-	18%
2016-2017	2	2	0	-	-	36%

Analysis shows that the presence of female students within the Student Council ranges from one to four activists out of 11 each year. The number depends on whether all parties nominated female students to participate. In 2007 and 2008, there was only one girl in the Student Council, since Shabiba and al-Qutub had not nominated any. Between 2011 and 2013, there was also only one girl in the Student Council because both al-Qutub and the IB did not participate in the Student Council at all during this period. The best representation of female students was in 1996–1997, when all the student movements nominated female students to represent them in the Student Council.

²⁵ Student Council at Birzeit University, 2015, Archive Material, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine.

As for the Israeli universities, Palestinian female students have been engaged in student work at Haifa University since the 1970s. In 1974, an Arab female student was elected Secretary of the Arab Student Body for the first time in the history of the Arab Student Movement. Over the past two decades, a woman has headed the electoral list only three times: twice on behalf of the Student Front, and once as a representative of the Student Assembly.²⁶

A female student headed the Arab Student Body at Haifa University twice, while only one woman ever headed the Regional Union for Arab University Students. Palestinian leftist student blocs ensured their female candidates had superior places on the electoral lists. This would promote their membership in the Arab Student Body and the Regional Union for Arab University Students.²⁷

Steps Toward Empowerment

To discuss the role of female students within the IB at national universities and to contribute to national development, a series of conferences titled the “IB Female Students Conference” took place in 1995, initiated by Birzeit University students. According to some manuscripts and statements in the IB archive, IB female students distributed a declaration entitled “The First General Conference for IB Female Students: Ambitions and Prospects” at universities and institutes. The declaration stated that the main objective of the conferences was to shape a conscious Muslim female who is active at universities and institutions.

IB student delegations participated and exchanged what was described in the official statement issued by IB female students at universities and institutes as “the benefit from the patterns and methods of thinking, as well as the academic environment which guides everyone in their place, away from the complexities of false traditions and customs and the philosophy of religious hardliners.”²⁸ “False traditions,” as the IB female students explained in the conference, means prohibiting women from participating in all aspects of life: in the political platforms, student syndicates, unions, and leadership positions.²⁹

Four conferences were held under the same title at different times. The first took place in 1995, followed by the second in 1996, the third in 1998, and

26 Yazbek, *Tamthīl al-Nisā’ wa Qadāyahūn*, 65.

27 Yazbek, *Tamthīl al-Nisā’ wa Qadāyahūn*, 65.

28 *Female Students at Universities and Institutes*, 1995, Islamic Bloc Archive, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine.

29 Interviewee I5, interview with author, February 2011.

the fourth in 2006. The fourth IB Female Students Conference was the last to occur before the Palestinian split. It was held on November 23, 2006, under the title “A Sister and Her Islamic Dawa Mission,” as a continuation of the General Assembly after an eight-year hiatus.³⁰

The conference was launched with a festival reflecting its mission. Video footage highlighted the obstacles and demands of female student work and provided a brief overview of the previous three conferences. The tenth government’s Minister of Women’s Affairs, Dr. Mariam Saleh, participated in the conference. In addition, delegations representing IB female students from the following universities attended: Al-Najah, Hebron, Polytechnic, Arab-American, Jerusalem (Abu Dis), Al-Quds Open University, and Birzeit University. The conference produced several recommendations, including affirming the pivotal role of women in Islamic Dawa, and established a follow-up committee to address the issues raised and implement solutions.³¹

Conferences resumed following the IB’s return to active work and election participation. The fifth conference was held in 2014 under the title “The Islamic Female Work Conference: Reality and Prospects,” during which female students discussed the role of women in Civil Society Institutions.

Interviewee I6, a former member of the Nablus Municipality representing the Change and Reform Bloc, discussed the role of women in municipal councils. She encouraged female activists to participate in municipal councils, emphasizing that it provides valuable experience working with ministers and engaging in government work for the future. She also addressed the obstacles to women’s political participation, arguing that these challenges are not specific to the Islamic movement in Palestine but are instead linked to the broader culture of society. According to her, the main obstacles were: (1) society’s perception of women’s work within municipal councils; (2) the lack of prior experience for women; (3) the absence of familial support; and (4) men’s control over decision-making in municipal councils.³²

Likewise, Islamic youth activist Isra Lafi spoke about the women’s education Masatib (terraces) at Al-Aqsa Mosque. Tqawa Ateeq, an active female student in the “Tanween Chain,” a youth group that promotes reading and is affiliated with the Islamic movement, discussed volunteer work at universities, using the “Tanween Chain” as an example.³³

30 Archival observation within the Islamic Bloc Archive, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine, done by the author.

31 *Birzeit University Islamic Bloc*, 2007, Islamic Bloc Archive, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine.

32 Interviewee I6, interview with author, Nablus, December 2014

33 *The Islamic Bloc*, 2014, Islamic Bloc Archive, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine.

In the context of women in political work, students have examined the conditions for women within Islamic movements, with reference to the role of women in the Arab Spring. Mona Mansoor, a prominent Hamas West Bank branch leader and member of the Legislative Council for the Reform and Change Bloc, spoke about women's roles in the Legislative Council. Islamic author Lama Khater discussed women in journalism, while former detainee Majida Faddah addressed the experience of female imprisonment in her research paper.³⁴

The third topic addressed by students during this conference focused on women in syndicate work. Shayma` Hassan, the former IB leader at Birzeit University, spoke about female students' participation in student activities. A former IB student council member, Ms. Rosa Zeid, discussed female student participation in the Student Council.³⁵

Most recently, an internal conference for the female student body was held in 2015 at Birzeit University under the title "Sustenance Along the Road to Preparation." During this conference, female IB members and leaders from all West Bank colleges and universities highlighted three main issues: (1) internal *Da'wa* education within the IB, (2) the institutionalization of the IB, aimed at transforming it into an organization with formal internal bylaws, and (3) the IB's current discourse at Birzeit University.³⁶

Intellectual and philosophical questions were examined, surpassing the framework of the female sector, encompassing the entire IB space, and reaching beyond the concerns of the female sector within the IB. These questions redefine the syndicate identity of IB members and concern the mechanisms of communication needed to attract and recruit new members. They refer to the significance of student affiliation with the IB, the role of the IB in reinforcing its members in matters of *Da'wa* in the absence of mosques, the pillars of strength required to establish *Da'wa* work within the IB framework, and the issues that may affect the IB's individual *Da'wa* work.³⁷

Furthermore, several lectures were held, alluding to the role of the sister within the IB, the problems she faces, the mechanisms needed to resolve these problems, and the methods the IB should employ to attract new members.³⁸ These lectures illustrated the achievements and both the internal and external activities of each university's IB and other Student Council

34 *The Islamic Bloc*.

35 *The Islamic Bloc*.

36 Islamic Bloc Archive, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine.

37 Interviewee I7, interview with author, Ramallah, September 2015.

38 Interviewee I2, interview.

bodies. The goal was to examine and convey this experience to the student blocs, share it, and discuss its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of those monitoring it. For example, an activity called “The Week of Girls” was carried out by the IB at Birzeit University. This initiative was, by all accounts, a novel experience for the female members of the IB. When female IB students at Polytechnic University learned about this experience and its merits through a conference, they decided to conduct a similar activity at their own university.³⁹

Concerning the significance of these conferences, they appear to epitomize one of the internal links in the IB’s resource mobilization process. Sh. Hasan, a former student leader of the IB, illustrates the importance of these conferences at the IB’s internal level:

Perhaps the most significant value these conferences carry is their ability to connect female IB members across universities, molding them into a single entity. Likewise, solutions to problems faced by members of the IB are usually discussed and proposed during these conferences, particularly the Sisters’ sector. As there are numerous shared issues, obstacles, and concerns, these conferences facilitated the treatment of these problems, utilizing student experience for their resolution. These conferences have provided an opportunity to focus on the female role within the Islamic Blocs, to develop this role through the steady exchange of ideas and opinions, and to enforce the female role by infusing other universities with these ideologies.⁴⁰

The most recent female student conference was held prior to the 2015 Student Council elections. Female IB students established common points of agreement in their public discourse with other students, including addressing the generally negative perceptions held by many students about female IB members and dispelling concerns regarding rumors circulating at most universities. These rumors included the segregation of university cafeterias by gender, the imposition of an Islamic dress code on female students, and the denial of entry into the IB for female students who did not adhere to a specific dress code, among other claims. To refute these rumors, a general mechanism for discourse and communication with male students in general, and female students in particular, was established in 2015. Each university implemented this mechanism according to its specific environment,

39 Interviewee I8, interview with author, September 2015

40 Interviewee I8, interview.

primarily utilizing media and social networking sites to foster a distinct change in students' perceptions.⁴¹

One indicator of improved conditions for women's participation in leadership roles within the International Baccalaureate (IB) was that, in the 2015–2016 academic year, the IB program at Birzeit University was the only student body to nominate female students for Student Council elections. Female candidates comprised 33% of the total IB council members. Two female IB students won the chairmanships of two committees within the council, namely the Cultural Committee and the Committee for Health and the Environment. In the same year, Sundus Qurt, an IB activist, became the head of the general Student Council for the first time in Birzeit's history. Moreover, Rasha al-Kurd, an unveiled IB activist, became a member of the general Student Council at Birzeit.⁴²

Likewise, female students at Polytechnic University participated for the first time in the Student Council, constituting 40% of the total IB seats, and heading the Cafeteria, Social and Cultural Committees.⁴³

From 2014 to 2015, the Shabiba did not nominate female students for Student Council or membership in the Student Council Assembly. This was also true for the Student Pole, as it did not nominate female students to head its committees within the Student Councils, either at Birzeit University or Polytechnic University. The presence of female students in the Student Council Assembly was thought to suffice.

The new theorizing about the role of female students in the IB is now expanding and becoming more vocal. Female authors in the West Bank began to demand more justice concerning female students' roles in the leadership of student movements.⁴⁴ Isra` Lafi, a political writer and former student activist, expressed the desire of the female students' sector to have a more prominent role in the leadership positions, saying:

What prevents the IB from having a four-year vision and strategy? During the first year, the presence of female students in the media could, at the very least, be expressed through a public speech. In the second year, their presence could be expressed through rhetorical conferences and varied events on the podium. During the third year, a minimum of three female students should gain membership in the Student Council.

41 Interviewee I8, interview.

42 *Islamic Bloc in Birzeit, 2016*, Islamic Bloc Archive, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestine.

43 Interviewee I2, interview.

44 Interviewee I2, interview. Interviewee I3, interview.

Finally, during the fourth year, there should be a female Student Council with a representative proportion of female students from all factions. Although female IB students are more effective than others, this will create a healthy, if less efficient, competition for them. Moreover, the demands may be limited to the presence of six female students vs. five male students within the same Student Council instead of creating a separate council. Why can't the planning process include a realistic developmental plan? This vision should be relayed publicly to an audience of female students. The message should be this: We want you to reach this stage. We will support you and strengthen your presence. Hence, female activists will have a developmental goal they can seek to achieve.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Despite their numerical dominance in higher education, this article has examined the persistent underrepresentation of female students in Palestinian student councils. Drawing on Ted Robert Gurr's theory of relative deprivation, it introduces the concept of progressive deprivation to frame the paradox experienced by these students, in which rising expectations are met with stagnant or diminished opportunities for political representation. While the Islamic Bloc has demonstrated comparatively structured and evolving mechanisms for female student inclusion, primarily through initiatives such as the al-Hara'er sector and recurring conferences, meaningful power-sharing remains limited and uneven across campuses.

The study reveals that, although some factions have made nominal efforts toward gender parity, institutional constraints, social norms, and factional politics continue to limit women's substantive leadership opportunities. Nevertheless, female students are far from passive. This research demonstrates how they mobilize, strategize, and articulate new visions for political agency within the movement, drawing on oral histories, archival analysis, and textual inquiry. Importantly, these efforts are not uniform, varying according to factional ideology, historical contingencies, and the specific university context.

Ultimately, the article underscores the need to critically examine the structures and discourses that perpetuate gendered exclusions in student political work. It advocates moving beyond mere visibility toward institutional transformation, in which representation is not symbolic but genuinely

⁴⁵ Interviewee I2, interview.

influential. The persistent efforts of female activists to define and expand their roles indicate that a shift from presence to power is not only possible but already underway.

Ethics approval statements

The institutional Ethics Committee at Ibn Haldun University granted ethical approval for this study (Decision No: 2024/03-06) on 15 March 2024, following a review of its design, data collection protocols, and analytical processes.

Funding details

This work was supported by the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD scholarship code number A/11/97281

Disclosure statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Citation/Atıf / الاقتباس

Bajes, Dalal. "From Presence to Power: Female Agency in the Palestinian Student Movement." *Ortaođu Etütleri* 17, no 2 (2025): 73-93

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