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Genre et développement :
un terrain contesté

*Gender and development:
A contested landscape*

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Gender and development under occupation: Multiple colonialities in action

An interview with Amani Rizq*

By Elena Aoun**

Amani Rizq is a Palestinian feminist activist and practitioner in the development sector in the SWANA region, with a focus on fostering sustainable and inclusive growth in the region, notably in areas affected by conflict, displacement and socio-political instability. Her long experience in navigating the complex realities of governance, aid and policy, notably in a context of occupation, has led her to engage in difficult conversations about the coloniality of development and gender, and the power relations in knowledge production. In this interview, she shares her experience, insights and frustration about these issues.

Amani Rizq est une militante féministe palestinienne et une praticienne du secteur du développement dans la région SWANA. Ses engagements se concentrent sur la promotion d'une croissance durable et inclusive dans la région, notamment dans les zones touchées par les conflits, les déplacements forcés et l'instabilité sociopolitique. Sa longue expérience des réalités complexes de la gouvernance et des politiques d'aide, notamment dans un contexte d'occupation, l'a amenée à s'impliquer dans des conversations difficiles sur la colonialité du développement et du genre, ainsi que sur les relations de pouvoir dans la production des connaissances à cet égard. Dans cet entretien, elle nous fait part de son expérience, de ses réflexions et de ses frustrations sur ces différentes questions.

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Introduction

How would you like to be introduced? Could you tell me about your background and your experience in the field of development and particularly on issues pertaining to gender?

I would like to be introduced as Amani Rizq, a Palestinian feminist with passion for justice, a seasoned professional with over eighteen years of experience in the humanitarian and development sectors, focusing on the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region. I have a strong background in grant-making, programme and financial management and advocacy, particularly in areas related to gender justice, women's rights, and social equity. I worked with Save the Children International, working on the right to education; the United Nations, working on refugee rights and protection; and with Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, working on funding women's rights and gender justice in the SWANA region. I have collaborated with groups and activists and supported movements aimed at fostering economic improvement for my community.

Academically, I began by studying education. I then pursued studies in media and public relations, followed by an MBA. And I am currently studying for a Master's in Refugee Protection and Forced Migration at the University of London because I have a passion for refugee causes and as a refugee myself.

And, on the side, I've been an activist for women's rights and gender justice. I believe that gender justice is a comprehensive umbrella. We want equality and equity for everybody; we're not talking about one gender; we're talking about everybody. As a Palestinian activist, I was engaged in the ongoing struggle for the rights, dignity and self-determination of my people. This involved advocacy against occupation, systemic injustices, and the broader dynamics of colonialism and displacement that affect Palestinians both within the homeland and in the diaspora. Activism in this context often meant raising awareness, resisting oppression and challenging global power structures that contribute to the marginalisation of Palestinians.

As a development practitioner, my work focused on fostering sustainable and inclusive growth in the SWANA region, specifically in areas affected by conflict, displacement and socio-political instability. This role involved designing and implementing programmes that address critical issues like poverty, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, infrastructure and social development. It required a flexible approach to problem-solving, often in collaboration with local communities, NGOs and international organisations, while navigating the complex realities of governance, aid and policy.

Together, these roles intersect at the core of social justice and empowerment. As a Palestinian activist, I am driven by a vision of human rights and liberation, which naturally informs my work as a development practitioner. The activism provides a moral and political compass, ensuring that development efforts are not just cosmetic, but also focused on dismantling systemic inequalities and ensuring that those who have historically been marginalised have a voice and agency in their own development.

Today, I'm talking to you mostly as a practitioner.

“Ready-made definitions create divisions and problems rather than provide us with solutions”

Thank you very much for sharing all these personal details. Now starting from what is at the core of our special issue, what does the premise that Gender and Development (GAD) is a contested landscape evoke for you?

I think GAD is indeed a contested landscape and it is the normal thing for me as a socialist feminist. Maybe I should have said that I’m a socialist feminist before I started to talk about anything. Identifying as a socialist feminist practitioner means believing that gender inequality cannot be separated from the broader systems of capitalism and class oppression. It is about recognising that the struggles women face are not just about gender, but also about economic exploitation, labour rights and the way resources are distributed in society. A socialist feminist approach emphasises that to achieve true equality, we need to challenge both patriarchy and the economic systems that benefit from women’s unpaid labour and the oppression of marginalised communities.

In the GAD domain, these ideas naturally lead to conflicts, making it a contested space. Throughout my career I have had multiple, often conflicting discussions about how gender equality/justice should be achieved. Some actors in GAD, like liberal white feminists, focus on individual empowerment, such as giving women access to jobs, education or having “a seat at the table”. Others, like queer activists or decolonial theorists – but who are not really actors as I still see many are focused on the theories, not the practical solutions, right? – focus on inclusion for minorities or on addressing the impact of colonialism. As a socialist feminist, I view many mainstream development approaches as too focused on integrating women into the same systems that perpetuate inequality, such as capitalism, rather than trying to transform or end those systems.

So indeed, the landscape is complex; it’s confusing and it’s evolving: this is my impression. This is what I had in mind when I read the title of the special issue.

In the call, we start with a very broad question about gender, sexuality and related terms such as gender equality, or gender justice, to which you have already referred. We’re interested in how those terms are defined in contested ways within the development field, for what futures, whose futures and through which avenues. We’re also interested in how the power dynamics unfold around the definition of these terms, and ultimately the impact of competing definitions and power dynamics on the conception, on the implementation and also on the follow up of development projects. And if you take it one step further, on the very lives of the target populations. What could you tell us about such questions starting from your own experience?

I think the domain itself is relatively new and questioned by many of us who work in it. For me personally, I decided to work in this domain because it was the only option for me. I couldn’t see myself working in the educational sector as a teacher, although education is one of the ways to change things. However it seemed to me very limiting and influenced by

the realities of occupation and patriarchy most of the time in our context in Palestine.¹ The curriculum aimed to suppress our history, erase the realities of occupation and colonialism while promoting narratives that serve donors' political agenda mainly regarding gender equality and development. It avoids discussing the lived experiences of Palestinians, silencing the truth about resistance and framing the fight for liberation as "terrorism".

This "gender and development" was a new area, with intriguing experimentation. Actually how would you do GAD in a context of *occupation*?

Early on, I became acutely aware of the power dynamics and systemic discrimination that shape our reality. I've always believed that development work and the fight for gender equality cannot be effective without a deep understanding of the local context. This belief often put me at odds with the institutions and teams I worked with, as they tended to apply standardised approaches without adapting to the nuances of our environment. However, as I delved into the theoretical literature, I realised that this wasn't just my personal struggle – it was shared by many others working in the sector. For me and many young professionals who later grew into seasoned practitioners, we constantly questioned the disconnect between foreign frameworks brought in by practitioners and the realities on the ground. If you're coming from outside the region with pre-packaged solutions, at the very least, you need to listen to those who live and work in the context every day.

In Palestine, the power dynamics are particularly evident, not only due to occupation, but also in how development projects are designed and implemented. The one-size-fits-all approach often imposed by foreign actors (governments, development missions or expats) disregards the complexity of life under occupation. It overlooks how colonial power structures shape every aspect of Palestinian life, including access to resources, mobility and basic human rights. This disconnect reinforces existing inequalities, as solutions that do not account for the political and social context often fail to address the real needs of the people. Instead, they can end up perpetuating the very power imbalances they claim to challenge.

So I started to accumulate knowledge by experiencing and comparing my realities as a woman who lives in the context of Palestine, specifically in Gaza, and then as a professional who was trying to come up with ideas and present things differently to donors. I wasn't focused on definitions of concepts like gender, decolonisation or feminism – I was more concerned with the tangible realities of inequality and occupation. Theories and labels seemed secondary to the urgent need for practical, context-specific solutions that truly addressed the struggles on the ground. For me, if you want to have equity for everybody, you need to start with realities on the ground, and occupation is one of the realities on the ground.

¹ Palestine refers in this text to historical Palestine. The interviewee's generation is one that maintained connection with its peers in all territories occupied by Israel (West Bank, Gaza Strip, the territory occupied by Israel in 1948 and Jerusalem with its unique status under international law) despite the geographic segregation. This denomination of Palestine is a deliberate strategy by Palestinians to resist the normalising of occupation and its realities on the ground.

Real change comes from addressing immediate and pressing challenges, not from applying abstract concepts or theories that don't reflect the lived experiences of those affected. If we don't tackle the root causes of inequality, like occupation, no amount of theoretical knowledge will bring meaningful progress.

The uniqueness of our context is crucial: you can't apply solutions developed in Western contexts or even other so-called Third World countries and expect to promote genuine development and gender equality. I felt a stronger connection to places like India in terms of the work they do on gender and development, so I travelled there to learn from the people directly. I admired how they developed solutions that were rooted in their own context, owned by the people themselves, rather than importing ideas from outside. India's context feels closer to the Arab region because both regions share histories of colonialism, poverty and deeply rooted social hierarchies, which shape their development challenges. For example, like many Arab countries, India struggles with issues of gender inequality that are tied to tradition, religion and economic marginalisation.

It might seem idealistic, but I believe this is how GAD should work – grounded in local realities. Ready-made frameworks with fixed definitions often create more divisions and problems than solutions.

You have already worked with several agencies on many projects and in very different national settings, including in the West Bank and Gaza. In the context of these very different missions, were you ever confronted with the need to clarify precisely what was your own understanding, your colleagues' understanding, the wider public's understanding and the donors' understanding of all these terms – gender, gender equity, gender justice, etcetera? If so, how did these attempts at clarification actually unfold?

Of course. In the contexts where I worked with local organisations, we were always confronted with the reality that the donor comes with a certain agenda and the strategy that goes with it. So we needed to find our own solutions to work within these constraining structures.

The issues I previously mentioned, about external solutions or definitions, often sparked heated discussions among the locals. People in the region – whether in Palestine, Jordan, Egypt or other Middle Eastern countries where I worked – consistently questioned the novelty of terms like gender, gender justice and gender equality. They are seen as external values imposed on local communities without adequate consideration of local contexts and values. The development sector often presents these terms in a binary manner, focusing on the social norms, rules and responsibilities of men and women. They frequently claim that solutions found in other contexts are also applicable to the local context. But are they right?

So I always wondered why we are seen as a testing ground for solutions developed by others; why aren't we – the local organisations that receive the instructions as a condition for funding – consulted, listened to?

Then the issue evolved to having discussions at a higher level, and trying to convince those who are in charge of funding that talking about Gender Transformative Approaches is not

something new to our contexts. For instance, Palestinians had these issues in the old days, and they practiced these things – development, gender, *etcetera* – before being colonised.

From my point of view, we need to go back to the roots and empower local communities to decide their own way forward. They should be the ones to find solutions and define terms that are meaningful to their realities, without imposing concepts that are foreign to the context and in a way feel condescending and disconnected from their reality.

From *al-aouna* to “development”: The loss of power by local communities

Very interesting. Could you please elaborate a bit more about the early experiences in Palestine you have just mentioned?

Then let me tell you about *al-aouna* (العونة), a tradition of community cooperation in Palestine that has its roots deep in history and evolved through different eras of foreign control. During the Ottoman period, *al-aouna* was a natural part of village life. Neighbours, sometimes neighbouring villages, would come together to help each other with big tasks like building homes and schools, paving roads or working the land. Men and women worked side by side, pooling their efforts to get things done.

Back then there was no cement, like you know people used to grind the stones from the mountains and they had to collect certain sorts of wood, make fires, prepare the material and then use mud and different materials to make bricks, and then they used it to build their houses and collective buildings. People did all this together. So these were very long-term projects for which people came together, volunteered and never used money. That was before capitalism and the invention of these terms, of “being individualistic”, of “chasing your dream”, of “gender”, *etcetera*. The collective act of solidarity and love brought people together, and in that act, you didn’t see that men were doing certain things and women were doing different things; men and women worked in the same area, helped each other. Everybody was doing the same work, contributing and working together. The village would feed the relatives and friends with *maqlobeh*;² they used whatever vegetables were available in season and made different versions of rice with some chicken, or meat with saffron. So these were solutions from the local community for the problems they faced.

In the last part of the Ottoman era, Ottomans often forced Palestinian men into unpaid labour for their own projects, which disrupted the way local communities worked together and weakened the solidarity that *al-aouna* depended on. They started the segregation between men and women and tried to create a hierarchy, with someone who has power, who comes and collects certain people, certain genders, choosing men who are capable of working more. And then, when the Palestinian men get weaker, the Ottomans bring other men to continue the free labour.

When the British Mandate took over, *al-aouna* continued in much the same way, though the challenges of colonial rule loomed large. It wasn’t until the Israeli occupation of

² *Maqlobeh* is a rice, vegetable and meat dish that is carefully layered, cooked, then flipped upside down before it is served.

Palestine, starting in 1948 and tightening after 1967, that *al-aouna* began to face serious threats. The occupation divided Palestinian society both geographically and politically, which made it harder for communities to come together. Still, *al-aouna* remained alive, especially in rural areas. Even today, an entire village unites during the olive harvest, a reminder of the deep connection to the land and tradition.

In the 1970s, amid the hardships of occupation, *al-aouna* became a symbol of resistance. Groups of young professionals and volunteers, often with leftist ideals, organised efforts to help farmers, repair infrastructure and support the refugee camps. This led to the creation of Popular Committees, which played a critical role in the First Intifada (1987–1993), organising protests, offering services (health, education and relief), and helping the Palestinians become less dependent on the Israeli goods and economy. But with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the sense of unified grassroots solidarity that *al-aouna* once represented began to fade as things were institutionalised. It became more of a tradition seen during specific events, like weddings or the olive harvest.

Today, *al-aouna* still offers an important lesson: real change comes from the community itself. Instead of imposing outside solutions or foreign terms that don't resonate with the local population, it's crucial to empower people to find their own answers, rooted in their culture and reality. By giving local communities the space to decide what works best for them, *al-aouna* or Popular Committees could be revived as a powerful tool for unity and resistance, just as it was in the past.

Could you please highlight the gender-related dimensions of *al-aouna*?

As I said, men and women, everybody in the village, would be doing the work together. They would be working together towards the end goal, whatever the project was: building a house, helping a family harvest big lands they had, for instance, rented from the Ottomans back then (the *daman* system). There was no specific rule for a specific gender because work was seen as the collective effort of a community.

This form of solidarity was engraved in the society and every project or problem brought people together to find solutions and they did this organically without any separation, segregation or assumed rules for the people who were involved in the project, whether men or women. *Al-aouna* was a powerful tradition that not only strengthened community bonds but also empowered women in pre-occupation Palestine. It allowed women to challenge gender norms and contribute to society in meaningful ways. However, the British Mandate and Israeli occupation disrupted these communal structures, making it harder to sustain the gender-empowering aspects of *al-aouna* in the context of occupation and colonialism. Women were seen as key actors in sustaining the community, and their labour was valued alongside that of men. *Al-aouna* also provided a space for women to build solidarity among themselves, sharing knowledge, skills and support. This practice contributed to a sense of agency among women, giving them a platform to participate in public life in ways that were otherwise limited by the gender norms of the time.

The dynamics of Palestinian society, and the role of women within it, began to change with the British Mandate and later the Israeli occupation. The British Mandate (1917–1948)

introduced new political and economic structures that disrupted traditional practices like *al-aouna*. Colonial policies reshaped land ownership, agriculture and labour, marginalising rural communities and weakening these solidarity networks. The 1948 Nakba (catastrophe) further accelerated these changes as Palestinian communities were displaced and their land was confiscated, leading to the breakdown of traditional systems of mutual aid.

Palestinian society became fragmented under the Israeli occupation: there were shut-downs during the First and the Second Intifadas that paralysed any collective efforts to come together for community support. The daily disruption created gaps, so the local communities came together to address these gaps. In the case of the First Intifada for example, student unions came together and formed Popular Committees, and these specialised in helping people. Though everything was blocked because of the curfews, they managed to bring food to people who were isolated. As extended curfews disrupted the educational system, these Popular Committees formed of university students helped in educating children driven out of school by Israeli occupation practices.³ They also came up with solutions for health-related issues. So, they created committees for everything: whatever the problems that faced Palestinian society, they were answered with local solutions. And women were leaders of all that work, just like men!

With “development” in the post-Oslo period, solutions were imported from outside and basically made the societies or organisations that are working in this domain out of reach for the local communities. They became an elitist structure. They provided of course some opportunities for people to work. But even with that, many of the locally-owned solutions disappeared. We started to have suggestions and solutions for issues coming from abroad. And then, in our case, when organisations started to talk about gender equality, they were perceived as outsiders. There was resentment and projections, whatever concepts were brought to the local communities, because they were seen as Westernised and imposed by colonial powers represented by the international community and its allies, i.e. these civil society organisations.

In a nutshell, as both an activist and a woman from these communities, I preferred returning to indigenous and native solutions, particularly when addressing current challenges related to women’s rights and gender equality. I believe these approaches are more suited to our Middle Eastern context, as opposed to adopting the frameworks and methods favoured by liberal feminists within the GAD discourse.

What you have shared is very interesting and really makes sense regarding my own experience of local contexts notably in Lebanon and Jordan. I have in that respect a question starting from the *al-aouna* practice. While listening to the kinds of challenges communities came together in order to face, such as the First Intifada, *etcetera*, or the kinds of situations or projects that also brought communities together, I kept wondering whether the aim was “development” as it is widely understood today or something else. Differently put, what do local initiatives actually aim at? How do local communities understand development when compared to the aim and the understandings of the wider

³ During that period pupils were expelled, teachers dismissed, and schools closed.

Western-centred, Western-inspired development enterprise in countries such as Palestine, the Middle East and elsewhere?

I think it's a bit different. From what I hear from my elders, Palestinian society was extremely "developed" before the Israeli occupation. The fact that they were under Ottoman rule and later the British mandate did not stop them from developing their cities, and their infrastructure, the villages... on the contrary. They didn't know the concept of states back then, the region itself did not know the concept of a state, but they were a stable society with a social fabric that allowed development to advance its goals, which is basically building a healthy society where there are citizens who have rights and responsibilities and who are able to advance their own agenda for development. Now, whatever agenda the development sector or international community brings to the region is influenced by the foreign policies of their countries. So we're talking about an external agenda financed by states with certain conditions and objectives, and in their position as colonial powers they don't want to advance the same agenda I'm fighting for, or that my society had before. I want to go back to long-term sustainable solutions that come from my society.

That's why I mentioned earlier that I was confused at the start of my career. How do you pursue development under occupation? How can you address gender issues in a context where development has been so severely set back? Whatever progress we had as a society before the British Mandate was systematically dismantled by the occupation. We were forced to start from scratch: doing damage control before we could even think about genuine development, the kind that people speak about so easily elsewhere.

Starting from an agenda imposed by colonial structures which are backed by the international community, and then trying to engage with the concepts of gender, feminism and development itself, feels deeply questionable to me. Working within this system left me frustrated, and after eighteen years, I've realised that the solutions presented so far do not lead to sustainable development for our society. It's all quick fixes. In Palestine, for example, it's mostly emergency relief – the international community steps in to patch things up, rebuilding what's been destroyed by the occupation, but this isn't real development. We're still stuck in a situation where colonial powers control the narrative and the reality, maintaining the status quo to benefit those who view the occupying force as a key ally, whether in the United States, Europe, our region or elsewhere.

For me, it's impossible to define development in a context like Palestine, where we haven't truly experienced development in over 70 years. Instead, we're constantly responding to destruction and occupation, unable to move forward toward real progress.

The coloniality of GAD and feminist foreign policies: "You are a tool in their hands"

You provide me with the perfect entry point to the next question which addresses the second major axis in our call for papers and which touches on feminist and decolonial perspectives in GAD. According to your own experience, how do actors' definitions of feminism differ in practice in the field of development and what are the implications for

activists, for activist strategising, but also for development programming, implementation, *etcetera*? And you've been talking about colonial powers. Could you elaborate more about what we mean by "decolonising GAD"? What does "decolonising" precisely mean for people in the field and locally? And again, what are the implications in terms of activism, in terms of development conception, programming, implementation, *etcetera*? And what is the impact on target populations?

I start by asking: have any of these international organisations defined the word "feminism" when they came to work in our context? The answer is no. Because what has happened – and I will blame academic institutions in this regard – is that we have (in the so-called Global North) been producing the kinds of practitioners, politicians and academic people who come to our region with theories about "us" that they want to implement. The knowledge they come with is presented to them by institutions that continue to produce knowledge that doesn't suit our contexts. So basically, the question about decolonising the practices on the ground should start with producing knowledge that's open to questioning. It is not fixed. One cannot have a foreign policy that pretends to be "feminist" and when it comes to practicing feminist values on the ground, you impose certain conditions. One would then say that "we have a feminist foreign policy in Sweden, but we cannot fund organisations in Palestine that work with BDS⁴ or identify as members of a coalition that supports BDS".

How can we tackle questions of power dynamics and systematic discrimination, which are at the core of feminism, if we put up with donor conditions when we work on the ground? I was faced with these dilemmas as someone who worked with organisations funded by the Canadians and Swedish governments who say that they have feminist foreign policies, but these fall short when it comes to the question of local ownership, especially in Palestine. The core issue is that the field of GAD is controlled by personnel, policies and conditions that create paralysis. Whatever efforts I make as an individual to push boundaries and educate others on what should be done on the ground are seen as personal, isolated actions. This is further complicated by the fact that even within our own communities, in Palestine and other SWANA countries, there are local practitioners who favour the easy solutions provided by international donors, organisations and United Nations (UN) agencies. Many of these actors, along with individuals who come in to "build local capacity" rely on a rhetoric that, to me, is fundamentally non-feminist. It rejects criticism and true inclusion, instead perpetuating a divide between "us" and "them", where we are consistently seen as the inferior part of the equation.

So, I want to flip these questions and ask the readers: what do we mean by feminism? We are talking about different things. Is it the liberal feminism that talks about solutions for gender equality through soft ways, laws and policies and all the theoretical matters? What about the root causes of these issues for women's rights and gender equality? As a socialist

⁴ The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement peacefully challenges Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands by pressuring companies across the world to boycott international and Israeli companies and institutions that are complicit in the violation of Palestinian rights and in the occupation (<https://bdsmovement.net/get-involved/what-to-boycott>).

feminist, and a committed one, I believe that we have the power to change things if we shake the system and change it. We cannot adapt our solutions to work with patriarchy and capitalism hand in hand. We need to shake them and introduce different solutions. As a practitioner working for a UN agency or an international organisation, why would I be fighting for women to go to work and not provide them with solutions for care-related issues? Why would I push a woman to leave home, work for a very limited wage, take care of the kids, take care of the house, of the elderly, and make sure that her husband is happy, the children are happy, and in the end I don't provide her with any solutions for her issues? And if she is tired, if she is sick, she cannot take time off, because she has to be there for everybody but herself. And we end up being sick, we end up being tired, we end up being angry.

And then we're accused of advancing the agenda of Western powers because we did not come up with what we mean by feminism. Are we going to follow in the steps of the Western societies? I see they are advancing their own agenda. They went through their own battles, and they fought hard to reach whatever they wanted. What they reached today and they advocate for doesn't work for me, in my context.

When we talk about intersectionality, a question comes to mind. Do the actors in the development and gender sector work on advancing their agenda with an intersectional lens? No, they don't. Most of the time, words such as "intersectionality" and "feminism" are buzzwords that they incorporate when they write proposals to a donor. Professionals, like me, are there to advance a certain agenda, a policy they cannot influence and therefore we are a tool in their hands. I am a tool, and I am used as a tool to mobilise more and more women who would make them look good when they are assessing their work or when they are reporting about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the UN or donors. So it's just an abusive circle, and I don't see myself finding any solutions in this context.

Thank you for sharing these powerful thoughts and experiences. They make me wonder whether this kind of development, especially gender-focused development, is disruptive for target societies.

Yes, it is disruptive, and I will give you an example derived from my own experience. I come from a progressive extended family that is well known for supporting women. Lately, I had a very disturbing conversation with someone very close about this topic in the context of what is happening in Gaza and the world, regarding whether we are agents of change or agents of the West. And, in the conversation, this young relative was repeating some of the narrative that the anti-gender movement is using globally and in the SWANA region. This person and many others are using what I have basically criticised against us: "How would you allow yourself to be a tool, or part of the scheme, if you know that this is imperialism, this is an agenda imposed to disrupt our communities? Why didn't you say no? Why did you advance to a career in this area, if you're not serious about challenging the whole thing? Is it because of salaries?"

Many of us couldn't see ourselves working in other domains because they were oppressive. We thought that this domain would be different. But the more you work in this area,

with international organisations, and in advancing what many see as a Westernised version of gender equality, the more you realise it does not empower us.

I hate the word “empower”. I don’t need empowerment as an Arab woman. I’m strong enough and I am a fighter. I want the means to continue the fight. I want the solutions to come from me. And I want to be given the opportunity, as a native woman in this society, to lead long-term projects that are not controlled, that are not censored, that are not conditioned when it comes to donors and their agenda. And every time, in every place I work, I try to push for this agenda. But I’m afraid this environment kicks all the brilliant, the strong and fierce fighters – from all genders, by the way. So, it becomes a place for bad apples to fester.

So, your question is very correct. This agenda destroys our societies, and it basically brings more division rather than bringing people together. Especially with this wave of anti-gender movement around the world, which is very severe in the SWANA region now: the backlash against gender!

Layers of hierarchy: “Knowledge production is restricted”

Thank you for that. Again, very thought-provoking. To some extent, you have already touched on the next question which is about the politics of knowledge production. We have many questions deriving from our own experience in this special issue on GAD, notably regarding the articulation with the world of practitioners. Much knowledge is produced about GAD, notably in academia and in development circles. But how does it translate particularly for those practitioners who are based in the South, or hail from the South but are no longer necessarily living there? We keep wondering about how knowledge production from the top and the North articulate with the experiences from the bottom and the South. You just said that brilliant people get kicked out if they push against prescriptions. What does it mean for knowledge produced or emanating from that bottom?

Knowledge production is restricted because it’s either you follow the book or you’re out. There are layers of hierarchy. It’s not about you as someone on the ground, an activist or practitioner finding non-mainstream solutions. If you try to produce knowledge or create momentum for collective knowledge production, you face rejection from various players, including donors and managers who fear losing their jobs, and people who don’t want to be seen as supporting “terrorist groups”, as they call them, in our context in Palestine.

Before the events of 7 October and the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, there were constant discussions, sometimes unwritten agreements, about excluding Palestine from everything due to its political sensitivity and “unique” historical context. However, you cannot talk about feminism or collective knowledge production in a context like Palestine, or the Arab region, without addressing the occupation and the harsh realities it creates on the ground. This is undeniable. Any attempt to produce knowledge or build collective memory is often opposed by actors from the so-called Global North.

For me, this opposition pushed me, early on, to align myself with my people and the so-called Global South. I turned to India, reading from and working with Indian feminists, and in recent years, I've felt a growing connection to Africa as well. Particularly when it comes to feminist economics, these regions have developed brilliant solutions and powerful advocacy without being guided by so-called Global North actors. In response to the original question, the same principle applies: knowledge production in our context is restricted by external power dynamics and discriminatory actions. The so-called Global North often views us as inferior, incapable of producing our own knowledge, and expects us to rely on what they provide to continue our fight. This is something we must resist.

So, differently put, that field of GAD remains essentially colonial according to your experience?

Very true.

What can we do in the face of these challenges as scholars such as myself, as practitioners and activists such as yourself? You have already shared some of your experiences, notably how you redirected yourself towards new connections, with India and Africa. Do you have further ideas about how we can start a genuine decolonisation process more collectively, and from different standpoints, and from different locations in the North but also, most importantly, in the Global South?

I think every individual, and you mentioned some of us, is very important for this discussion. Scholars are very important in this regard because they are the ones who are graduating generations of younger people. Look at the amazing activists now in the university encampments, what they're doing. They're shaking the world. And that is because of some academic people, scholars who were behind the scenes and were encouraging these young people to read, to challenge the narrative, to come up with ideas, to go and explore and find other solutions outside of the textbook.

I believe there is a responsibility to secure unconditional funding for academia, enabling it to introduce new concepts and continue producing knowledge outside of existing power dynamics. I've seen first-hand how organisations claim to be producing knowledge, but what they create is often influenced by the internal power structures and individuals within those organisations. Academics and researchers sometimes bend their findings to please those in control due to these dynamics. To truly find our voices, we need our own resources – ones that allow us to speak authentically. We also need to bring together people who are willing to collaborate, brainstorm and bridge the gap between different actors, because there are many in the Global North who are equally frustrated. Borrowing solutions from other contexts could benefit their struggles too. Securing these resources would free us from constantly chasing funding, allowing us to focus on genuine knowledge production. While voluntary work can help, it's not sustainable – we need to be able to support ourselves and feel secure while doing this important work.

As for activists, I'm a big fan of community organising: I've mentioned some examples earlier from the Palestinian historical context. I've worked with a feminist organisation on helping women organise but with a feminist lens. I mainly focus on helping those pursuing

change in the Arab world in organising their power and leadership to achieve justice in their causes (women, activists, people from the region, *etcetera*). There are fantastic opportunities for us to grow together and slowly and organically learn and solidify our initiatives. We need to do it together, and at a global level, and not to continue to be in a bubble. And have conversations about accountability and continuous conversations about how we can grow together. Because, unfortunately, we are reproducing the same power dynamics that we have in NGOs and we're bringing them to the movement that we're starting.

We have people who are not willing to give up power. We're not showing an example of healthy relationships among the actors themselves. So, I think it's very important to introduce these concepts and talk and learn: to have everybody around the table for more discussions and collective action. The world is becoming like a small room with the technology and ways of communication that we have today. I'm listening to many of the conversations that are taking place, but they're not flying far away from the tree. We need to find a way to start and build on what's happening because of Gaza's genocide; there's this global rage against capitalism, against patriarchy and against oppression. There is a good window of opportunity to do something differently, while going back to our roots joining indigenous and native people everywhere.

And I think people in academia can initiate this process. Maybe this issue will be something that will trigger serious conversations and will bring people together. You never know.

One last question that comes to my mind. If I say "gender, development and Gaza" what does it inspire in you?

"Gender, development and Gaza"... It inspires me to see things happening on the ground outside of colonial structures and I think what we see around us is crossing all the borders. The international organisations are trying to catch up with the actions on the ground. People have raised their voices, and Gaza has inspired many actions around the world. I hope to see things formalising towards a world that can get rid of patriarchy and capitalism. I want to see a world for our kids where they can take an airplane and fly to Gaza, take a vacation on the beach; it's such a beautiful place.

I'm very grateful for everything you have accepted to share. I have run out of questions. Is there anything you'd like to add?

I can't help but share some of the frustrations I've encountered as a feminist woman navigating different international organisations. The common thread? What I've come to call the "white feminism syndrome." It's that brand of liberal feminism that's often more about maintaining privilege than dismantling patriarchy. Honestly, it's been maddening – at times leaving me feeling completely drained and questioning the point of it all. I'd love to see more conversations, analysis, and action around this. How can we, as a movement, challenge and change it? Because let's face it, these so-called feminist liberals are often tools – whether knowingly or not – of the very systems we're trying to dismantle. And, frankly, I'm ready for a world where this flavor of feminism becomes part of the past. We're all sisters, we're all comrades, we all can change the world without stepping on each other's toes, and creating more obstacles for less privileged women.