

## COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

# Feminist Silences in the Face of Israel's Genocide Against the Palestinian People: A Call for Decolonial Praxis Against Complicity

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## Introduction

Feminist scholarship has long been committed to advancing justice, challenging systemic inequalities, amplifying the voices of women and other marginalized groups, and fostering global solidarity. However, the ongoing genocide in Palestine exposes a troubling silence within the field, revealing a deeper systemic failure to confront colonial violence (see also, Aldossari 2025; Ajour 2025; Jabiri 2025).<sup>1</sup> This silence is not merely the absence of speech; it represents an active political stance that legitimizes oppression and undermines feminism's foundational commitments to justice. It is a form of complicity that has tangible, gendered consequences, including reproductive harm and systemic dehumanization, as we elaborate here. We argue that the silence of feminist scholarship on Palestine constitutes a profound ethical and intellectual failure, and we call for an active engagement in decolonial praxis to realign feminist work with the principles of justice, solidarity, and resistance against all forms of systemic violence.

This paper maintains that feminist silence on Palestine is not an isolated disregard but a reflection of broader ideological and institutional complicity within Western academia in general, and Western feminist scholarship in particular. Building on Spivak (1988), Jabiri (2024) argues that such silence functions as a form of settler-colonial epistemic violence—deliberately erasing Palestinian narratives, legitimizing colonial structures, and causing both symbolic and material harm. By failing to confront

Israeli settler colonialism and the systemic violence inflicted upon Palestinians, Western feminism inadvertently sustains colonial oppression. This silence reinforces a “colonial common sense”—a framework that normalizes settler-colonial narratives and marginalizes Palestinian resistance within feminist discourse.

The article further explores how this feminist silence is embedded within broader institutional complicity, particularly within Western academic institutions. Universities invest in companies tied to the Israeli military and suppress pro-Palestinian activism under the guise of academic neutrality or Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies. These actions demonstrate that feminist silence is not merely an individual failing but part of a systemic alignment with colonial power structures. This paper calls for a reinvigorated decolonial feminist praxis that confronts these systemic failures head-on. It argues for concrete actions such as divestment from institutions supporting settler-colonialism, amplifying Palestinian voices, and resisting institutional repression. In contrast to the inaction of many feminist scholars, student movements—such as the Gaza Solidarity Encampments and the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement—offer powerful models of decolonial praxis. These movements bridge the gap between theory and action, highlighting the transformative potential of solidarity when it is translated into tangible resistance. Their activism underscores the ethical imperative for feminist scholars to move beyond performative gestures and engage in meaningful, decolonial action.

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## Feminist Silence and Its Material Consequences

Feminist scholarship has long been committed to advancing justice, challenging systemic inequalities, amplifying the voices of women and other marginalized groups, and fostering global solidarity. As Aldossari (2024) argues, modern feminism has often betrayed its foundation principles by remaining silent or complicit in narratives that dehumanize Palestinians, framing their struggle as a collateral or blaming cultural factors while ignoring the structural violence of colonization. Kynsilehto (2024) argues that feminist academic silence on genocide exposes contradiction in their decolonial and intersectional commitments. Kynsilehto explores the challenges of addressing settler colonialism, the role of feminist ethics of care and the impact of academic hierarchies on engaging with such crises. She calls for academics to actively oppose genocide and reconsider their basis to promote meaningful solidarity and transformative change.

This betrayal has tangible, material consequences. The silence of feminist movements and scholars not only erases Palestinian suffering from academic and public discourse but also legitimizes the structures that perpetuate violence. Palestinian women and men endure intersectional violence that is both symbolic and physical. Women face reproductive harm, such as being forced to deliver babies without anesthesia under blockade conditions (Boukari et al. 2024), while men experience systematic dehumanization through the erasure of their familial roles—widowers and fathers left without families. Both men and women are subjected to sexual violence, with reports of Israeli gang rapes of Palestinian male detainees (Cordall 2024) and the kidnapping and rape of Palestinian women by Israeli soldiers (OHCHR 2024a, 2024b). These atrocities illustrate how colonial violence is not only an attack on individuals but also on the social fabric of Palestinian communities (Shoman 2025).

This complicity allows for the normalization of gendered violence, including sexual violence and “reproicide” (Ross 2017)—the deliberate targeting of reproductive health and family structures. In the case of Palestine, Israel’s genocidal acts extend beyond immediate physical destruction, into deeply personal realms of health, bodily autonomy, and dignity, affecting every aspect of Palestinian life (Shoman 2025). This impacts on future generations by denying Palestinians the ability to reproduce and maintain familial and social continuity (Khouri 2024; Repo 2024). Women disproportionately bear the burdens of this violence, undergoing C-sections and surgeries without anesthetics while caring for infants in dire conditions, often without access to clean water or sanitation. Medical practitioners report unprecedented challenges, with infants born into environments where survival is nearly impossible. The tragic deaths of five infants at Alnaser Hospital, who starved to death after being left alone for weeks, exemplify the harrowing reality of reproicide (Goodwin et al. 2023).

Feminist scholars must interrogate their complicity in narratives that marginalize oppressed, colonized communities and recommit to a feminism that centers the experiences of those affected by systemic structural violence. Addressing the genocide in Palestine requires reclaiming feminism’s transformative

potential by bridging the gap between theory and practice. Silence in the face of atrocities is not neutrality—it is complicity. The credibility of the feminist movement depends on its willingness to confront power, challenge injustice, and stand in solidarity with all women facing violence, including those surviving the unimaginable conditions in Gaza. As Ajour (2024) has previously written, “As a Palestinian with a family in Gaza: I Don’t Want Sympathy. I Want Solidarity”; real solidarity entails opposing systems that perpetuate violence against Palestinians, challenging political agendas, resisting colonial narratives, and prioritizing justice over political interests. True solidarity demands a critical examination of settler colonialism, active resistance against genocidal violence, and unwavering support for Palestinian rights and self-determination.

## Silence, Epistemic Violence, and the Ethical Stakes of Research on Palestine

Al-Hardan highlights the presence of “hidden and unethical material and analytical research practices” in the study of Palestinian refugees within Western academia. She argues that this research “is only possible because of sanctioned epistemologies in academic institutions that treat colonized and stateless peoples as “others,” to be consumed as objects of knowledge” (Al-Hardan 2014, 69). In much of Western feminist research, and beyond, Palestine is framed through the “Israel-Palestine” lens. This framing has not only become so entrenched but also is now an accepted condition for speaking, teaching, and writing about Palestine. It is a practice that reflects a “sanctioned epistemology” where the colonizer and colonized are treated as equivalent, enabling the continuation of settler colonial violence and discourse.

To understand the depth of feminist silence on Palestine—especially in the context of the ongoing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza—it is essential to examine how this silence is linked to the framing of Palestine in ways that do not challenge or resist imperialist power structures in Western academia. This silence functions as epistemic violence within academic institutions.

Spivak (1988) defines epistemic violence as the distortion or erasure of the lived experiences of oppressed communities through knowledge production. In the case of Palestine, this violence is evident in how the situation is framed as a mere “dispute” or “contentious issue,” reducing the Nakba of 1948 to just another perspective. This is not an intellectual oversight, as it serves to distort historical realities and normalize settler-colonial violence. By presenting the Palestinian struggle as something open to contestation and equivalence with their colonizers, this framing dehumanizes Palestinians and obscures the brutal realities of settler-colonialism (Jabiri 2024).

The position of equivalence, which treats the colonizer and colonized as equal, often emphasizes neutrality and the “scientific” nature of research. This perspective ignores the material harm caused by knowledge production and the ethical responsibility researchers have to acknowledge the violence their

work can perpetuate. While some forms of racism are recognized within Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) frameworks in the UK's higher institutions, systemic racism against Palestinians is often normalized. For instance, in the UK, researchers—including Palestinians—are encouraged to frame their work using the “Israel-Palestine” lens to avoid being labeled subjective, a framing that is unimaginable in the study of other oppressed groups, such as survivors of sexual violence or the Holocaust.

Positionality is a central concept in feminist and postcolonial thought, referring to how power, privilege, and identity intersect to shape the production of knowledge and determine whose voices are amplified or silenced. Researchers are never neutral; their political affiliations shape how knowledge is produced (Said 2004) and whose experiences are validated. Many scholars, particularly in the West, operate from institutional positions that are deeply entangled with imperialism, colonialism, and Zionism.

Feminists have long advocated for research that acknowledges positionality and recognizes people as experts of their own lives. However, this approach is often overlooked in research on Palestine. Feminists in privileged positions within Western academia frequently fail to interrogate how their institutions and governments are complicit in imperialism and Zionism. While intersectionality theoretically supports solidarity among oppressed groups, true solidarity requires taking a clear anti-colonial stance. The refusal to do so allows feminists to maintain institutional security while Palestinians endure material violence.

By distancing themselves from the political implications of their work, researchers allow harmful narratives to persist and silence to continue. The relationship between positionality and solidarity underscores how one's position impacts not only knowledge production but also the lived experiences of those being researched. Unfortunately, this connection is often neglected in discussions of research ethics, creating an environment where epistemic violence against Palestinians can thrive.

For ethical research on Palestine, scholars must actively confront these issues, ensuring their positions do not reinforce harmful narratives or perpetuate silence on settler-colonial violence. This requires a commitment to an anti-colonial stance, unconditional solidarity, accountability, and an ethics of justice that centers the lived experiences of those enduring settler-colonial violence. Focusing solely on the “scientific” contributions of research while disregarding the material consequences of knowledge production fails to address the real harm caused by academic scholarship.

The ethical implications of this position extend beyond Palestine, challenging the very foundation of who is entrusted with knowledge production in the study of marginalized or oppressed communities. If feminist scholarship, and the broader academic community, fail to confront their complicity in the ongoing oppression of Palestinians, how can we trust the knowledge they produce in any other context?

## Institutional Complicity and the Role of Western Academic Institutions in Settler Colonial Violence

Another important aspect of positionality, beyond what was discussed in the earlier section, is that feminists should reflect upon their positionality within Western academic institutions. Western academic institutions are deeply embedded in racial capitalism, funding and sustaining colonial violence through investments in military industries and partnerships with Israeli universities (Bhopal 2024; Stein 2022; Wilder 2013). With regards to Israeli settler colonialism, universities have financial investments and research partnerships that directly support settler-colonial structures. Many Western universities invest in companies, such as Hewlett Packard, Cisco Systems and Caterpillar, all of which are implicated in Israel's military occupation and systemic oppression of Palestinians (Boxstein 2020; Divest USS, n.d.). Beyond investments, universities collaborate with arms manufacturers like BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin, whose weapons are central to the settler colonial state of Israeli military's operations (Corderoy and Stockwell 2023; LSESU Palestine Society 2024; Sheffield Campus Coalition for Palestine 2024; Warwick Student-Staff Solidarity Network 2024). There are also a considerable number of research partnerships between universities in Europe and Israel, facilitated by the inclusion of Israel in EU scientific research funds, such as Horizon 2020 (European Union 2021). As Palestinians have long argued and Maya Wind's recent book details, Israeli universities have been integral to Israel's domination over the Palestinian people (Wind 2024). Since October 2023, Israeli universities have also provided vital support for Israel's genocidal war (Sen 2024a).

Western universities do not merely fund colonialism; they also reproduce and enforce its ideological frameworks. This is evident in the way they police expressions of solidarity with Palestinians, curtail academic freedom, and silence critique of Israeli apartheid and genocide. This ideological complicity becomes apparent when examining how academic institutions handle expressions of solidarity, freedom of expression, and research collaborations in relation to different international crises. The responses of Western universities to events in Palestine can be sharply contrasted with their reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Whereas, many Western universities publicly announced their solidarity with Ukrainians and swiftly moved to end any cooperation with Russian universities (Cliburn 2022; Nicholson 2022), in the case of Palestine, these same universities have not only been largely silent but have actively moved to suppress solidarity movements. Despite their legal obligations to uphold academic freedom and freedom of expression, as cornerstones of scholarly inquiry as well as democracy more broadly, universities have pursued a range of actions and policies that serve to stifle activism in solidarity with Palestinians and even to regulate academic discussions of current events. These include calling the police to break up student encampments, cooperated with police to surveil students, subjected students to costly legal action, created disproportionate bureaucratic hurdles for staff and students wishing to organize events discussing events in Palestine and, in some cases, have even prevented events from occurring, as well as investigating, disciplining and, in some

cases, dismissing staff and students (amongst others, BRISMES CAF 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e; Burton 2024; Matthews et al. 2024; MESA 2024; Romero 2024; SOAS Liberated Zone 2024). This differential response underscores the structural biases within universities, raising concerns about the persistence of institutional racism and the selective application of principles like academic freedom.

In addition, we have even seen universities reference EDI policies and equalities legislation in order to justify censorship and repression, claiming that protests against Israeli genocide make certain staff and students feel “unsafe” (Alsultany 2025; BRISMES CAF 2024e). Moreover, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism has also been used to discipline and remove staff and students who speak out (BRISMES-ELSC 2023; Sen 2024b; Tatour 2024). It is a telling example of how ideological complicity operates within universities. While these policies ostensibly aim to foster inclusion and equality, their uncoupling from critical analyses of systemic oppression often renders them ineffective—or even counterproductive—in addressing institutional complicity with colonial and imperial systems. Rather than challenging power structures, these policies are being weaponized to suppress dissent and marginalize already vulnerable groups. The suppression of expressions of solidarity with Palestinians contributes to their dehumanization, thereby constituting another form of complicity with genocide. The use of EDI policies in this way reveals the extent to which these institutions align with hegemonic political agendas under the guise of neutrality, further entrenching their ideological complicity in systems of oppression. Universities in the United States, Germany and the UK have been particularly aggressive in suppressing freedom of speech and targeting students and staff protesting the genocide. The failure of universities to support Palestinian liberation exposes the limitations of institutional anti-racism efforts, which have been reduced to performative gestures rather than substantive commitments.

University responses to the genocide in Gaza reveal the empty rhetoric of commitments to address institutional racism, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and to “decolonize” institutions following many years of student demands to address colonial legacies in universities. UK universities have often been vocal in this regard, although the rhetoric has not necessarily been matched by meaningful actions (Shain et al. 2021). Indeed, when faced with a real-life example of settler colonial violence and genocide, the same universities did not only fail to stand up against the genocide, they actively suppressed student and faculty efforts to protest against it, as discussed above. This leads us to ask, what does decolonization mean if it fails to be anti-colonial? These institutional responses reflect ideological alignments with an unspoken colonial common sense (Al Takriti 2024). A colonial common sense considers colonial logic as truth, what the colonizer does is right, while any anti-colonial work is considered wrong, illegal and criminal. The logic takes on the world view of the colonizer. The colonizer is the object of sympathy. The colonized, on the other hand, is seen through the eyes of colonial logic as an object in need of (violent) domination, containment or extermination. According to this common sense, actions to resist colonization are wrong and criminal. The colonizer’s violence is justified,

while the colonized’s resistance is considered unlawful, immoral and terrorism.

The suppression of freedom of speech and criminalization of Palestine activism on many Western university campuses partially explains the silence of some Western feminists. Yet, given feminists’ historic stance against all forms of oppression, one must wonder what type of feminism these feminists follow and why there is not more of an outcry against this colonial common sense. This points to the failure of many Western feminists to learn from the lessons of anti-colonial feminists of the Global South in the second half of the 20th century (Ababneh 2025).

The responses of universities to events in Palestine reveal that, despite the rhetoric of EDI and statements of commitment to decolonizing higher education, Western academic institutions continue to be structured by a “colonial commonsense” that perpetuates and benefits from racism, imperialism and militarism. This colonial commonsense is a form of epistemic violence, which feminist scholars must challenge not only by producing critical knowledge but also through action. As Tuck and Yang (2012) emphasize, decolonization is not a metaphor. It cannot be reduced to performative solidarity or symbolic gestures; it demands tangible action and structural change. Furthermore, decolonization does not work if it is not based on a firm anti-colonial stance. Feminists working within universities must also embody decolonial praxis by actively resisting our institutions’ complicity in colonial violence and oppression. This requires collective action, solidarity, and a consistent commitment to justice. It includes standing in solidarity with students and colleagues who are targeted for their support for Palestinians by speaking out against university management when they repress student activism and censor events about Palestine. It also means joining with students to pressure universities to end their involvement with companies that support Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people. As Martin Luther King famously said, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” This sentiment underscores the indivisibility of justice; our freedom as scholars and citizens is intertwined with our responsibility to challenge systems that enable oppression, such as those perpetuated by universities.

## Decolonial Praxis

Movements like BDS have sought to address systemic oppression, challenging global complicity in settler-colonial violence. Despite these efforts, Western feminist scholarship and activism have often remained detached, failing to integrate the lessons of such activism into its praxis. This detachment perpetuates the systemic erasure of Palestinian experiences, enabling continued colonial violence and reinforcing structures that sustain gendered oppression under Israeli occupation. Amid the silence and complicity of both academic institutions and Western feminists, students have emerged as powerful voices of resistance, boldly confronting the oppressive systems that universities uphold. The student-led movement that emerged after October 7, 2023, has been one of the largest transnational student movements in history, peaking in spring-summer 2024



with the establishment of hundreds of Gaza Solidarity Encampments across the globe. Notably, these protests do not only call for a ceasefire, but also for decolonization. Indeed, “it is not a mystery that students are protesting” (Marcus and Franquesa 2024, 141); this generation of students grew up amidst crumbling capitalist economies, increasing poverty, ecological destruction, and the rise of far-right parties. They witnessed and often participated in movements such as Rhodes Must Fall, Black Lives Matter, and Extinction Rebellion and viewed the call for Palestinian liberation as on a continuum with these other struggles. For them, silence is not an option because they understand that material consequences—displacement, militarization, genocide—stem directly from institutional complicity.

Despite the global political suppression of the BDS movement, and the attempts to label its supporters as antisemitic (Barghouti 2021; Orleck 2024), today's student movement collectively identifies settler colonialism as the structural process shaping the lives of Palestinians, and driving the current war and genocide. In putting into action longstanding feminist, queer, anti-racist, and anti-colonial critiques of power and institutions that are taught in classrooms, students have connected theory and praxis in ways that their teachers, including feminist ones, are failing to do. Kynsilehto (2024, 1) astutely refers to the “illusion” of a shared understanding of the importance of intersectional and decolonial feminist critique, which since October 2023 “has been proven to be a myth and mere lip say.” Scholarship has not translated into solidarity with Palestinians, despite the scholasticism that has killed thousands of students, at least 94 university professors, and left each university in Gaza in ruins (Dader et al. 2024). Instead, students have been the ones with the ethical backbone to speak back to power, and suffered intimidation from university management, campus security, and police violence for their actions. The lack of solidarity with Palestinians is on a continuum with a lack of solidarity with students and opposing violence on and securitization of campuses, and the suppression of academic freedom. For feminists, the cost of this silence is not just the ethico-political credibility of academic feminism, but more importantly, complicity in the structural violence of our institutions. Ignoring these institutional dynamics does not merely erode academic integrity—it makes feminist scholars active participants in the maintenance of settler-colonial violence. The student movement underscores the urgency of translating feminist principles into meaningful action against colonial and systemic oppression. Our students' resistance highlights a path forward that academics must join, rather than merely observe.

## Conclusion: Consequences of Feminist Silence

The genocide in Gaza and the complicity of academic institutions and feminist scholarship have revealed the urgent need to confront the material consequence of feminist silence as a form of settler-colonial epistemic violence. Complicity is not merely passive inaction; it is an active force that enables the destruction of Palestinian lives, Palestinian society and Palestinian futures. Silence is not neutral—it is a political position that legitimizes and sustains settler-colonial oppression, reinforcing the erasure of Palestinian resistance and survival. More

than an ethical failure, feminist silence sustains the structures that enable settler-colonial violence, from the erasure of Palestinian scholarship and academic institutions to the destruction of entire communities.

Reclaiming feminism's transformative potential requires moving beyond abstraction and performative solidarity toward tangible actions rooted in decolonial praxis and a genuine commitment to justice. Complicity manifests in both institutional frameworks and individual positionalities. We urge the Gender, Work & Organization community to take an active role in resisting complicity. This includes challenging the dominant colonial common sense that frames Palestinian liberation as at best, a peripheral issue, and at worse criminalizes it, both within academia and beyond. Feminist journals, organizations, and conferences must actively center Palestine and other cases of settler colonial violence and dispossession as a feminist issue, recognizing not only that colonial violence is gendered in terms of its impacts, such as, violations of reproductive rights, but also that gender plays a key role in constituting racialized, colonial hierarchies and structures. This means that feminists need to go beyond a focus on women's issues and gendered violence and stand in solidarity with all Palestinians and other victims of colonial violence and systematic oppression, be they women, children or men. As a first step, scholars and institutions must learn from Palestinian feminists and other Indigenous feminists who have long articulated the gendered dimensions of settler colonial dispossession and colonial violence, amplifying their voices, citing their scholarship and, most importantly, acting on the implications of their arguments in terms of actively decolonizing Western academia and ending its complicity with settler colonialism.

At the institutional level, resisting complicity demands urgent action against Israeli scholasticide—the targeted destruction of Palestinian universities, students, and educators. We call on the academic community to support the rebuilding of Gaza's universities through direct financial aid, research collaborations, and advocacy for the protection of Palestinian scholars (Fozbu 2025).<sup>2</sup> Feminist scholars must take an unequivocal stand against institutional support for Israeli settler colonialism, apartheid, and genocide. This means actively participating in Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns by refusing collaboration with Israeli academic institutions and other organizations complicit in Palestinian oppression and dispossession, such as weapons manufacturers and technology companies, as well as demanding that universities divest from such companies.<sup>3</sup> Feminists should also speak out in defense of colleagues and students disciplined and even fired/expelled for supporting Palestinian rights and demands that universities uphold rights of freedom of expression and protest.

Beyond academia, feminists should play a role in publicly opposing government policies that enable genocide and shield Israel from accountability, while suppressing Palestinian solidarity movements. The feminist community must reject silence in the face of these injustices and instead use its platforms, networks, and research to demand meaningful change. This is not merely a theoretical exercise—it is an ethical imperative. Decolonial feminism is a praxis, not a metaphor. As scholars committed to justice, we must challenge institutional

complicity, break our silence, and stand in unapologetic solidarity with Palestine. If feminist academia fails to act, it is not just silent—it is actively complicit in sustaining settler-colonialism, apartheid, and genocide.

We invite Gender, Work & Organization to serve as the foundation for a special issue on reclaiming feminism's transformative potential, foregrounding decolonial feminist praxis in confronting systemic oppression, including settler-colonial violence and the complicity of respective academic institutions and governments. Solidarity must be more than rhetoric—it must translate into sustained, visible, and unapologetic support for justice and liberation. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “Your silence will not protect you” (2017). Feminist resistance cannot be conditional. Silence is complicity, and complicity kills.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

There is no data used in writing this piece as it is a commentary piece.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For exceptions see, for example, Alqaisiya (2024), Kynsilehto (2024), Marquardt (2024), Mhajne (2024), Potvin and Lefurgey (2024), Pratt et al. (2025), Qutami et al. (2023), Razack (2024), Repo (2024), and Salla Dieng (2023). These examples reveal that feminist scholarship in opposition to Israel's genocide has been produced overwhelmingly by feminists of color and Global South feminists.

<sup>2</sup> An example of an academic initiative in support of universities in Gaza is the BRISMES Fund for Higher Education in Gaza: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/the-brismes-fund-for-higher-education-in-gaza>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on campaigns to divest from companies supporting Israel's apartheid and genocide, see, <https://palestinecampaign.org/campaigns/divest-for-palestine/>; for more information on campaigns to boycott Israeli universities, see: <https://bdsmovement.net/academic-boycott>.

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