



ISHA L'ISHA – HAIFA FEMINIST CENTER RACISM AT THE WORKPLACE WOMEN PEACE & SECURITY PROJECT – 2009

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NOTE TO THE ENGLISH VERSION

Due to the fact that Palestinian and Jewish women each experience racism in different ways, the issues and dilemmas for each group varied. As we realized this, it was decided to write two separate reports, each adapted according to the contents and themes raised by the two groups. The two writers, Dalia Halabi (Arabic version) and Yali Hashash (Hebrew version) met several times during the course of writing the reports and discussed the contents. Most of the contents are similar, but with different emphases. The English version is a short summary of these two reports, and in no way does it exhaust the complex contents, dilemmas and issues raised in the seminars.

ISHA L'ISHA—HAIFA FEMINIST CENTER is a feminist collective established in 1983. Our aim is to bring about social change by promoting values of equal rights and equal opportunities for all women; eradicating discrimination, violence and oppression of women; and fostering solidarity among women.

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Foreword by Galia Aviani

In 2009, Isha L'Isha's "Women, Peace and Security" project focused on the issue of racism in Israel. In the last decade, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reached new levels of violence, contributing to racism outbursts in Israel, both institutionalized as well as in the fabric of daily life. This increase in racism and its manifestations in the public sphere has significantly contributed to the sense of lack of personal security among many citizens of Israel. The violence of the conflict is not restricted to spaces beyond the border or to the players in the conflict alone, but rather it is directed to additional "others" who are perceived as those who are not partners. Israeli society is increasingly becoming harmful to more and more groups living within it.

Isha L'Isha decided to cope with racism in a place where we spend many hours every day – that of the workplace. In order to cope with the problems characterizing racism in workplaces and the ways to cope with these problems, we decided to hold three one-day seminars, whereby each seminar was attended by women from a different professional background.

The structure of these seminars included two parts: a lecture on feminism and racism followed by a workshop where participating women had an opportunity to bring forth their own experiences and difficulties related to racism as they experience it in their respective workplaces. The target group was women with feminist awareness and interest in engaging in the problem of racism in Israel, with the hope of reaching additional women with less awareness on the issue in the future.

All three seminars included Palestinian women – Muslim, Christian and Druze, and Jewish women – *Mizrahi*, *Ashkenazi*, heterosexual and lesbians, and immigrants from the FSU, all from different ages.

The first seminar, **Resistance and Coping with Racism in the Framework of Gender and Women's Studies** was intended for lecturers in the field of gender studies. Participating women examined their ways of coping with racism in the academia in general and in gender studies classrooms in particular. 25 women attended this seminar. The following are some of the themes raised in the seminar:

- Tactics employed by the academia to silence political contents, especially during times of escalation of the political conflict. There is difficulty in connecting the learning materials to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an alternative voice to the general public atmosphere. This is an especially difficult process when a Palestinian female student or lecturer engages in it, as it is perceived as a threat on the Jewish majority in class.
- The curriculum contains within it a reproduction of the unequal power structure that exists in the Israeli space: there is lack of representation

of Palestinian and Arab researchers. Thus, the western superiority model over the Arab one is preserved.

- Courses on Arab feminism are separated from the core learning materials, and thereby perceived as a “niche” only.
- The lack of female Palestinian students in gender studies is especially prominent, and more than that the lack of female Palestinian lecturers. The reason behind the lack of their representation stems from the fact that discourse practices in the classroom and in the department for gender studies are adapted exclusively to the needs of the Israeli-Zionist-Ashkenazi discourse; a fact that makes the integration of women who are not part of the hegemonic group difficult.

The second seminar, **From Racism against Teachers to Teachers against Racism** was for teachers engaged in working for social change within the educational system, faced with gender-based racism and difficulty in teaching contents that do not match the national Zionist narrative. 15 women took part in this seminar, and the issues they raised included:

- Discrimination on a gender basis.
- Difficulties in professional advancement due to their leftist and/or liberal worldviews; teachers who are paying a high price for their wish to create alternatives for the traditional system.
- Difficulties of *Mizrahi* teachers in the educational system.
- Issues of status in the teachers’ room based on gender, religion, ethnicity and nationality.

The aim of the third seminar, **We’re Not Like That! Racism in Organizations for Social Change** was to examine practices of racism within organizations for social change. 15 women participated in this seminar and the following issues were raised:

- Difficulties of women who are filling the “Palestinian/*Mizrahi*/Lesbian woman” etc. rubric (the quarter system), without there being a genuine reflection in the organization for the agenda they bring.
- Organizations of a hegemonic group find it difficult to adapt themselves to other cultures that are represented in their organization (Russian, *Mizrahi*, Palestinian, Ethiopian women, etc.) in terms of language, symbols, rituals, and more.
- There is an appropriation of the oppression of a certain status, a certain ethnic group and the like. There are women whose starting point in society is lower although they supposedly represent a privileged group.
- Women from subjugated groups are required to raise issues of discrimination and oppression on a regular basis, thereby reinforcing their weakened status within the organization. This happens instead of there being joint responsibility for these problems on behalf of all members of the organization.

- There is often suspicion between groups on an ethnic, national or other basis, which make authentic cooperation difficult. There is no loyalty for the radical point of view that cancels these differences.

These seminars constitute a starting point from which we can continue in many directions – action or support groups, changing work patterns, developing a model for structural change with the aim of changing work patterns and social racism dynamics in organizations, creation of a program for cultural and political sensitization, continuing to expose racist practices and bringing them to the awareness of institutions and organizations, and more.

Goals of the Seminars

The goals of the seminars were formulated following a number of discussions:

1. Discussing the concept of “racism,” its relation to feminism, and an attempt at understanding it within the Israeli context.
2. Raising problems in each target group regarding difficulties when faced with expressions of racism.
3. Examining a possibility of creating an active mechanism of support for the groups of women in the face of racism they come across in their spheres of existence.
4. Creating a “tool box” for coping with racism that can be used by other women as well.
5. Encouraging the groups to continue working with the knowledge and tools they acquire.

The following are some questions raised in the seminars:

1. Is there racism among feminist women? Have the actions taken by feminist groups throughout the years succeeded in reducing racism among us? What else can be done in order to fight racism?
2. What are the difficulties women feminist peace activists face in their daily lives? Can these difficulties be overcome in reciprocal and collaborative frameworks? Is there a difference between the daily experiences of activists based on ethnic origin and status?
3. To what extent can solutions to these questions be proposed in the framework of the workplaces examined?
4. How to conceptualize the concept of racism in a way that will fit reality in Israel?

Recommendations for Action

The seminars dealt with the quarter system and racism in organizations for social change on the one hand, and with action possibilities of feminists in conservative workplaces on the other hand. After a decade of using the quarter system, we can map the following difficulties:

- (1) Racism in Israel is affected by the ongoing conflict which silences attempts at raising the issue of racism by the Palestinian side, and creates among the Jewish side a sense of threat from the demands of the Palestinian side. This ongoing conflict touches upon fundamental issues, and therefore cooperation within Israeli feminism is faced with difficulties of reaching common ground for Palestinian and Jewish women, as the basic issues – such as the character of the state, the right to exist here – are not solved. Thus, dialogue between Palestinian and Jewish women within feminism has reached a dead end. Today, there is no common basis for formal cooperation between Palestinian and Jewish women, and cooperation is conducted on an individual basis. When formal cooperation does happen, it does not entail dialogue and creation of common ground, and is often dissolved around the same issues over and over again.
- (2) Radical feminist education can be a two-edge sword. Many activists feel exhausted as they stand day in day out under scrutinizing eyes that inspect whether they are loyal enough to their values on the one hand, and productive enough on the other. There is often contradiction between the action – fundraising, service provision to a certain group, creation of a coalition on a specific issue – and the radical values of the activist. This contradiction leads to considerable suspicion, hindering action. The need to be loyal to radical and critical viewpoints blocks action, as apparently the action patterns of Jewish, *Ashkenazi*, Palestinian, Lesbian and other women are known beforehand, and there is nothing to be done in order to avoid the automatic activation of these patterns.
- (3) Today, after a decade, there is still a feeling among *Mizrahi* women that they need to justify the fact that *Mizrahism* is a significant part of their identity as an axis of oppression and a cultural resource, and that the life experience of *Mizrahi* women differs from that of other women.
- (4) The burden of representation makes it difficult for feminist women to bring themselves as complete persons to the action field.
- (5) Regarding action within a more conservative framework such as the academia and the educational system, it seems that the difficulties arise from the great sense of loneliness within the system – especially among teachers – coupled with a sense of lack of power when facing a very powerful system, especially among women from the academia. For both groups, motivation to act included a wish to act for changing the system structurally, in addition to a wish for changing things so that action can be taken to reduce racism inside the classroom.

In order to cope with these difficulties, the following actions were proposed:

- (1) There is an urgent need to continue working on the issue of racism and to initiate the creation of a broad feminist coalition to fight against racism and develop effective strategies to eliminate racism in all its forms.
- (2) Encouraging social change and feminist organizations to develop the “quarter system” as a solution to ensure equality in representation of the different groups.
- (3) Creating social networks and support groups that will enable to cope with everyday as well as ideological dilemmas, and provide space for sharing, joint thinking and consultation.
- (4) Inviting more women who are committed to the struggle against racism on all its forms to take an active part in social change organizations, so that activists are not forced to struggle for change alone.
- (5) Developing and holding an array of workshops and courses that deal with coping with racism in various workplaces.
- (6) Developing educational programs on racism to raise the awareness of school pupils regarding racism and proposing alternatives to cope with the phenomenon.
- (7) Training educational professionals on how to cope with racism in all its forms.
- (8) Crating a professional space for female lecturers and teachers to acquire teaching strategies that help in creating equality in the classroom.
- (9) Creating an equal space for the Arabic language in different work spaces.
- (10) Working with different state bodies, such as the Ministry of Education, in order to reduce racism.
- (11) Encouraging work in separate national groups as a safe space that is free of racism, and from which participants can go into a heterogenic world equipped with better coping tools.

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