

A feminist group that betrays women



by Phyllis Chesler

The National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) has, for a long time now, abandoned women in favor of racially marginalized groups supposedly fighting for "liberation" from those who allegedly oppress and wish to destroy them.

Under the leadership of Miriam Elman, together with Corinne Blackmer, the [Academic Engagement Network](#) has issued a faculty [statement](#) condemning the NWSA for its silence on Hamas's Oct. 7 rape and murder rampage. The statement calls upon NWSA to denounce Hamas's atrocities, call for the release of Israeli hostages and "form a Task Force to assess and evaluate antisemitism and anti-Israel bias in the NWSA."

Elman stated, "At the Academic Engagement Network, for some years we have been hearing from our faculty members that the NWSA was becoming an increasingly hostile space for Jewish women scholars, particularly for those who are already among the most vulnerable in the academy: untenured and contingent faculty and graduate students. Now, its refusal for weeks to speak out to condemn the terror and mass sexual violence perpetrated on scores of women in southern Israel on Oct. 7, or to make any effort to educate its membership about rape as a weapon of war by Hamas, is simply shameful."

Alas, the NWSA is only mirroring what is being taught in women, gender and sexuality programs at numerous universities around the country.

The NWSA just held their 43rd annual [conference](#) in Baltimore, which they titled, “Luta Continua: The Struggle Continues: Resistance, Resilience, Resurgence.” In their “Educational Resources for Meaningful Solidarity,” they highlighted the struggles (not *women* engaged in struggles) of Native Americans in the United States, as well as groups in Mexico, Hawaii, the Congo, Sudan, China and Myanmar. Not content with all these very real horrors, however, it appears that the NWSA felt the need to make one up: the “genocide of Palestinians.”

In the section titled “The Fight for a Free Palestine,” the NWSA suggested sources that are pure propaganda churned out by racist anti-Israel activists. They include hysterical rhetoric like the false claim that Gaza is “the world’s largest open-air prison.” Among the authors are ferociously antisemitic activist-scholars like Rashid Khalidi, Noam Chomsky and Omar Barghouti.

The NWSA also suggests films and documentaries that support terrorism, such as Hany Abu-Assad’s “Paradise Now,” which depicts suicide bombers as soulful victims and Israelis as ominous, helmeted soldiers. False claims that Israel is “ethnically cleansing” the Palestinians appear again and again.

But the NWSA’s idolatry of the film is also a betrayal of the group’s mission of advancing women’s rights. “Paradise Now” completely whitewashes Palestinian gender oppression and violence. In its depiction of women in Gaza, Judea and Samaria, there is no forced veiling, forced child marriage, woman-battering or honor killing—all of which are endemic among Arabs in the region. The film’s fantasy woman lives alone, drives her own car and entertains male visitors in the middle of the night. In real life, she’d be lucky to escape

alive. Arab women have been and are being killed for far less.

I have researched NWSA's keynote speakers over the last decade. Every one, without exception, was a woman of color (African-American, Native American, Indian and Arab Palestinian). Hispanics, East Asians and European-Americans were apparently deemed unworthy.

It is NWSA's right to engage in racial bias, of course. It is problematic only in that the keynoters' work primarily concerns racial and not gender issues. To the extent they deal with women's issues, it is only in the context of women of their own race. They rarely focus on gender oppression that affects women of all races and classes.

Among these keynote speakers were Angela Davis, Dima Khalidi, Ghadir al-Shafie, Arundhati Roy, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Elizabeth Alexander and Patricia Collins Hill. The one shining exception was my dear departed friend bell hooks, who always wrote about women in general, all sorts of women, including black women.

I founded the field of Women's Studies in 1970 at the City University of New York. NWSA did not yet exist. They were founded in 1977 and I organized panels for them at least twice. One took place at the University of Connecticut in 1981 and focused on antisemitism among feminists. Later that same decade, I convened a panel with bell hooks at Spelman College about horizontal hostility among women.

The NWSA may have had its moment, but that moment has long passed. It no longer cares for its original mission of "promoting and supporting the production and dissemination of knowledge about women and gender."

Unfortunately, the organization's thinking is no longer original, brave, scholarly or independent. It has become Stalinized and Palestinianized. In the process, it has abandoned women themselves. Its focus is now race, prison

abolition, “queer” anti-Zionism, “liberation” struggles and decolonization. It is obsessed with gender identity over and above sex identity. It has become, in other words, just another far-left lunatic asylum.

They do not speak for me and I am ashamed of what they have become. I had such high hopes for them, and they have all been dashed.

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