

Opinion – How Inclusive is ‘Inclusion’ When it Comes to Palestine?

Written by Dina Zbeidy

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DINA ZBEIDY, JUN 18 2024

On the 31st of March the New York Times reported on Hesen Jabr, a nurse who was fired after using the word genocide when referencing Gaza during an award ceremony speech. A labor nurse herself, she said the following when accepting her award: ‘It pains me to see the women from my country going through unimaginable losses themselves during the current genocide in Gaza...Even though I can’t hold their hands and comfort them as they grieve their unborn children and the children they have lost during this genocide, I hope to keep making them proud as I keep representing them here at NYU.’ According to a hospital spokesperson, Jabr was warned in December not to bring up her “views on this divisive and charged issue into the workplace.” The award ceremony was attended by many of Jabr’s colleagues, “some of whom were upset after her comments. As a result, Jabr is no longer an NYU Langone employee” said the spokesperson.

From the above we can deduct a number of things. First, Jabr was probably a very good employee, as she was given an award for her work. Second, it pained her to see so many Palestinian women losing their children, born and unborn. An issue that is probably close to her heart being a labor nurse herself. Third, she used the word ‘genocide’ to refer to what is going on in Gaza, in line with hundreds of genocide scholars and international rights institutions, who either argue that a genocide is already unfolding, or follow the ICJ’s warning of a plausible genocide. Fourth, the hospital deemed her words “divisive and charged”. Her words upset “some of her colleagues” and therefore, her firing was legitimate. Because some of Jabr’s colleagues were upset, Jabr got excluded in the most literal sense, losing her job.

When I came across this article, it reminded me of a blogpost I had written myself a few months ago. In it I recount how I witnessed people, mainly at higher education institutions, using the argument that we should refrain from using the word ‘genocide’, as it might be hurtful to some people. In the post I marvel at the fact that the feelings of ‘some’ people are deemed more important than talking about the actual killing and human rights violations of others.

One argument for silencing events and speech on Palestine, on university campuses and other workplaces, is the focus on ‘inclusion’ that has seen a rising trend in the last years. Many employers are devising policies and projects on what is termed D&I (diversity and inclusion), DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion), or DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging). While in literature there is not one definition for the “inclusion” part of these approaches, in my research on the topic I came across two main foci. Some inclusion policies focus on emotions, and the importance of creating a workplace environment in which individuals and groups feel welcome, respected and valued to fully participate. Other definitions focus more on structural inclusion, in which employers ensure providing equal opportunities in which employees have sufficient and equal access to decision-making and information. Some approaches combine both of them.

In both examples that I mentioned above, that of nurse Jabr and of my own observation in academic institutions, the focus of the employers/managers/decision makers seem to be on the first definition, while completely ignoring the second. The fact that some employees feel upset or hurt is what threatens this sense of inclusion, and in order to make sure that they feel a sense of belonging and inclusion, silencing other employees and even firing them is justified. How ironic it is, that when it comes to Palestine, the inclusion of some leads to the exclusion of others, and

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decisionmakers seem unbothered by that exclusion.

Does this mean however, that employees always have the right to say whatever they want and should never be excluded? Definitely not. Most institutions and workplaces have a code of ethics, and publicly proclaim that they stand behind and abide by international conventions and human rights documents. Most employers would say that they do not tolerate hateful speech, which includes racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, antisemitism, and other forms of discrimination. When a colleague uses a racial slur against another colleague, or against a group of people, workplace ethics dictate that this exclusionary language should be countered and the person should be held accountable.

The question is, however, whether terming the killing, maiming and starving of thousands of Palestinians as genocide falls under racist and exclusive language? Or whether the opposite – silencing those criticizing an unfolding genocide is itself an exclusionary, and often racist, act? I would argue the latter. If workplaces, including hospitals and universities are serious about ‘inclusion’, they will make sure to create spaces for talking about, mourning, and critiquing the grave human rights violations of Palestinians. Even if – or especially – when it makes some people feel uncomfortable.

About the author:

Dr. Dina Zbeidy is an anthropologist, researcher and lecturer at the Leiden University of Applied Sciences. She is currently conducting research on diversity and inclusion interventions and policies. Previous research topics of hers include human rights education, refugees and displacement, nationalism and settler colonialism.