
research article

“More rifles than laptops”: Palestinian students' experiences of social work education in times of genocide

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Social work education and practice are deeply entangled with structures of oppression that maintain racism and settler colonialism. This article invokes a critical feminist, context-informed methodology focusing on Palestinian Jerusalemite social work students' experiences at one of Israel's institutions of higher education amid the genocide against Gazans. The findings point to the racialization of social work education, operating in a specific historical moment within a negatory settler-colonial higher education system, nurtured by the university's politics of “zero tolerance” and the militarization of higher education. The article reveals the multiple aggressions embedded in the complicity of social work education and educators. It concludes by calling on social work educators to bear their ethical responsibilities, refrain from being complicit with systems of oppression, refuse the militarization of education, and develop decolonial thinking, praxis, and interventions.

Keywords social work education • students' experience • social work complicity • settler colonialism • genocide

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Introduction

Historically, social work has been influenced by doctrinal authority that upholds and justifies racial supremacy (Dyson et al, 2020). Even when social justice appears to be an explicit social work value, it continues to produce racialized social stratification (Bhuyan et al, 2017). Goode et al (2021) documented that in the US, social work students who started their education with a commitment to social justice theories and skills reported very few opportunities to apply them. Social work students

reported a disconnect between the skills and curriculum in social work schools and social work's overall mission to mobilize for social justice (BlackDeer and Ocampo, 2022). Furthermore, critical and anti-oppressive scholars in social work have detailed the crucial role of race and racialization in exploring the relationship between the oppressive foundations of social work and settler colonialism, representing multiple geographies and temporalities in their critiques (Hick, 2002; Baines, 2007; Johnstone, 2016). Henry and Tator (2009: 23) described the active processes and practices of racialization, defining it as “the broad social processes, including colonialism and cultural privileging, through which racialized ‘Others’ are constructed, differentiated, stigmatized, and excluded.” Scholars have also explored the relationship between social work and settler colonialism in multiple national contexts; for example, in Canada, social workers were historically white settlers abetting settler-colonial violence and upholding settler colonialism's demands (Johnstone, 2016; Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong, 2019).

Several scholars have pointed out how, as in other settler-colonial contexts, Israeli universities serve the settler-colonial project (Abu-Saad, 2006; Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019; Wind, 2024), and studies have demonstrated that Israeli universities affected by the Zionist agenda produce hegemonic knowledge, including by training military and police personnel and by participating in weapons laboratories (Sa'di-Ibraheem and Furani, 2022; Wind, 2024). Wind (2024) detailed how Israeli universities have been pillars of dispossessing the Indigenous community for over a century, being designed as anchors for land grabbing and Judaization: they tailor degrees to enhance Jewish supremacy and maintain illegal operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, and the following Israeli genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza not only resulted in civilians' severe human suffering but also exposed the dangerous complicity of the Israeli academy and raised crucial questions about Palestinian students' experiences in Israeli academia during genocidal warfare (aChord, 2024; Adalah, 2024). Building on existing scholarship on social work education and structures of oppression in the settler-colonial academy (Johnstone, 2016; Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; BlackDeer and Ocampo, 2022), this article unpacks colonized students' experiences in social work classrooms alongside settler peers and teachers within the context of an ongoing genocide. In doing so, we aim to expose the unseen forms of colonial workings of power embedded in academic spaces and practices.

To address the role of Israeli academic institutions during the ongoing genocide, this article first presents the politics of “zero tolerance” and how it influences the role of Israeli institutions of higher education during genocide. Drawing on zero-tolerance politics, the article unpacks Palestinian students' experiences and perceptions of their social work education at Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HU) while witnessing their people's genocide, and we engage with their analyses in relation to the explicit social work values of justice, equality, and human rights in their classes at HU. Second, we examine students' experiences with professors and practitioners. Third, we examine spaces of social work education: the classrooms and the students' social media platforms amid genocide (October 2023–February 2025). We analyze the findings through critical, decolonial, and feminist theoretical frameworks to illuminate the racialized power structures at play, as well as how colonized students perceive, actively resist, and contest these forms of oppression. The article ends by examining how students counter silencing and by addressing the process of conscientization (Freire, 1970)

for student social workers when their minds and lives are militarized as they face ongoing genocide. The following section further details this study's context, with specific attention to HU as an Israeli academic institution.

Research context: the politics of "zero tolerance"

The context and timing of the article require a review of the political unrest in Israeli academia in reaction to Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, and the retaliatory Israeli genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza. Some scholars at HU (Goldberg, 2024; Mordechai, 2024) and many others around the world (Giroux, 2024; Hasan and Buheji, 2024; Rifai, 2024; Sahara, 2024; Segal and Daniele, 2024) have insisted that the Israeli war against Gaza constitutes genocide, referencing the inconceivable death rate, catastrophic wounding and mass destruction, forced displacement, and starvation (Albanese, 2024; UNOCHA, nd).

The Hamas attack and subsequent genocide have had a substantial impact on higher education institutions in Israel. Israeli universities' first reaction was to postpone the start of the 2023–24 academic year until the end of December 2023 (Ilan, 2023). Two days after declaring the postponement of the academic year, HU invoked a "zero tolerance" policy via social media and emails: it informed students and faculty members that the university would have "zero tolerance" for any member who supports and/or incites terrorism.¹ Simultaneously, it expressed full understanding of those drafted to the army, framed as national protectors who are supported and contained (Hebrew University, 2023). Additionally, during the first months of the war, Israeli institutions of higher education, particularly HU, expressed public support for students, faculty, and staff drafted to serve in the Israeli military. Many departments and offices (as well as individuals) attached the Israeli flag to emails sent to students, and the flag was displayed on campuses with the slogan "Together we will win!"²

On the delayed first day of HU's academic year, Palestinian students encountered a massive number of visuals, including Israeli flags, posters related to Israeli casualties and hostages, and a significant presence of armed Israeli students, faculty, and staff. This aesthetic of violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017) continued throughout the academic year. However, later in the academic year, HU implemented a "learning to live together" approach, shared through emails, social media, and posters displayed across campus in Hebrew and Arabic. This approach claimed to have policies of inclusion and "containment"—HU's commitment to the freedom of expression for all members of the university community (T. Sheaffer, personal communication, June 5, 2024). Despite these efforts, the legal advocacy group supporting Arab minority rights in Israel, Adalah (2024), released a report in 2024 documenting a surge in disciplinary actions taken against Palestinian students in Israeli academic institutions in response to their social media activity. The report illustrates how disciplinary policies exclusively targeted Palestinian students and were explicitly endorsed by the Israeli Minister of Education, turning universities into sites of censorship. The report suggests that such proceedings have created a hostile and unsafe academic environment for many Palestinian students and faculty members, including at HU. Additionally, aChord (2024), a social-academic organization for social psychology at HU, has initiated a research project that examines Israeli universities' administrative measures taken against Palestinian students and professors during the war. aChord's findings indicate that the administrative measures, including delegitimization, suspensions, or other

formal punishments, have caused fear, silencing, delegitimization, and a threatening and hostile atmosphere for Palestinians on university campuses.

Indeed, HU enacted the “zero tolerance” policy against the first author of this article, a Palestinian professor, because she signed a petition in late October 2023 calling for an end to genocide in Gaza and an immediate ceasefire (Butler, 2023). In March 2024, following the misinterpretation of a podcast, HU administration and the dean of social work accused her of denying the violence against Israelis committed by Hamas, manipulating her objection to the state’s use of women’s and children’s bodies to advance genocidal violence to make it appear as if she were denying the violence against civilians, women, and children. This distortion resulted in a suspension letter stating that the university is “proud to be an Israeli, public, and Zionist institution” (Odeh, 2024). The continual persecution resulted in her arrest in April 2024, and the immense threat to her and her family led her to step down from her position at HU in August 2024.

Well before October 7, 2023, however, scholars exposed racist policies in the Israeli educational system. Abu-Saad (2006) elucidates that when Israel is unable to meet the basic human needs of Indigenous minority groups for identity, inclusion, and equality, it develops systems that use force to silence and repress Palestinians. Abu-Rabia-Queder (2008) and Halabi (2016) have argued that Israeli academia can be an alienating and strange cultural world for Palestinian students. Likewise, Golan-Agnon (2020) has explained that HU does not acknowledge the historical and political contexts of Palestinian students. Sa’di-Ibrahim and Furani (2022) have revealed how the Israeli university system is based on negating Palestinian presence and existence, arguing that foundational and structural problems have turned the university into a space of siege. Silencing, “zero tolerance,” racism, and the politics of siege accelerated and were further exposed after October 7 (Fúnez-Flores, 2024).

Methodological reflections

This article is part of a four-year research project, initiated in the academic year 2022–23, to investigate the experiences of Palestinian students from Occupied East Jerusalem (OEJ) studying at HU. However, one year later, after the October 7, 2023, attack and the outbreak of the genocidal war on Gaza, the resulting academic hostilities against Palestinian students in Israeli institutions of higher education required methodological and theoretical amendments to deeply examine and comprehend Palestinian students’ experiences. After HU adopted direct and indirect silencing policies, Palestinian students were hesitant to participate in individual interviews for fear that expressing their views regarding HU policies toward Palestinian students would result in disciplinary action or informal retaliation. However, when we invited them to share their experiences in groups with their friends and classmates, they responded positively. As a result, the research team implemented focus group discussions (FGDs) to expose the experiences, views, and fears of Palestinian students, both individually and collectively. During the first FGD, the research team noticed that discussion helped students to create a safe space to unlock their fears, to get support from their fellow students and the research team, and to build a sense of togetherness. Accordingly, the team held more FGDs that were implemented as support groups amid what the participants defined as “a sense of orphanage and exclusion.” The research team held seven FGDs, which included 71 students from different faculties.

During these group discussions, seven students studying social work shared deep concerns and fundamental dilemmas regarding their studies and the profession's values. As students witnessed a livestreamed genocide, events raised the question of how Palestinian Jerusalemite students experience social work education in a Zionist Israeli university. In response, the researchers sought to further explore the lived experiences of students studying social work by conducting additional interviews with Palestinian social work students. Their narratives revealed underlying structures of repression, practices of carcerality, and the way these students abolish them and create spaces to breathe.

In order to gather the psychosocial, political, and educational perspectives and experiences of Palestinian Jerusalemite students at HU's social work school, we employed a qualitative approach, which assists in researching human lived experiences (Fossey et al, 2002; Obasi, 2022). Munn (2016) has argued that when applying the interview method, social workers utilize their professional skills, such as active listening and empathy, to create what Pratt-Clarke (2012: 84) calls a "theoretical and methodological space" for the silenced to speak their truths and critique institutions that maintain marginalization and inequality. Accordingly, the research applied critical and feminist methodology (Smith, 1990; Code, 1991; Harding, 2004) that required thinking from the margins to the center (hooks, 2000), reflecting interrelationally on power and resistance, opposing dualities, and engaging with complex and fluid ways of becoming (Ferguson, 2017). With the same aim, we chose the feminist grounded theory (FGT) methodology for data analysis, as it unpacks systemic entrapment, including structured racism and its unique impact (Taylor, 2020), through comprehending social work students' subjectivities, meanings of concerns, and psychosocial actions while situated in their context (Charmaz, 2014; Taylor, 2020). The FGT methodology for data analysis starts with individual experiences and then develops conceptual categories to synthesize, organize, and understand collected data to identify patterns therein (Oktay, 2012; Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021). More importantly, FGT methods allow simultaneous data collection (theoretical sampling) and data analysis in order to explain and fill out analytical categories and to define commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures (Basis, 2003) to enable theory construction (Oktay, 2012; Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021). Researchers have argued that the congruence of feminist epistemology and grounded theory offers knowledge discovery while suggesting that ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process will ensure critical examination and analytical exploration (Wuest, 1995; Taylor, 2020). We also relied on context-informed methodology, which "recognizes the complexity of both the socio-political context and the workings of power that produce knowledge and affects in a specific situation" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Roer-Strier, 2016: 553) and is consistent with FGT (Wuest, 1995). To apply a qualitative and FGT theoretical framework to our research process, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 36 randomly selected undergraduate and postgraduate Palestinian Jerusalemite social work students and teachers. Following ethical approval from the Institute of Criminology's Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Law at HU, we shared an informed consent form, a guarantee of anonymity, and the option to withdraw from the research with all participants before the interview.

The current article includes an analysis of 44 semi-structured interviews, conducted with 22 students and two faculty members, as follows:

1. Core group: the original research methodology involved a core group of 30 students who were randomly selected and followed throughout their studies. Each student was interviewed twice per academic year to explore their nuanced concerns, experiences of debility, trajectories of empowerment, and expressions of livability and futurity. Among these participants, five were social work students who were interviewed twice prior to the outbreak of the genocidal war on Gaza, resulting in a total of ten core group interviews before the war. In these ten initial interviews, the students raised concerns about the applicability of social work values within their academic programs and described experiences of marginalizing their political realities in class. Following the onset of the war, the researchers interviewed these five students from the core group three additional times during the ongoing genocide, amounting to a total of 15 interviews.
2. Randomly selected group: in addition to the core group, the research incorporated semi-structured interviews with randomly selected students. Prior to the outbreak of the genocidal war on Gaza, the researchers conducted six interviews with social work students. During the ongoing genocide, the researchers carried out eight additional interviews with a different group of students. In total, we conducted 14 general interviews.
3. Member checking: although member checking is used in qualitative research to support validity by asking participants to approve or reject interpretations of their voices (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Candela, 2019), many researchers argue that it is done as a formality (Candela, 2019). To support the credibility of the analysis, researchers conducted five additional interviews specifically for member-checking purposes: three with students and two with faculty members from the social work department.
4. FGD: due to the complex context, we used different methods and member-checking tactics to critically comprehend, verify, and examine the research findings. Accordingly, the researchers conducted a single FGD to facilitate collective reflection and to validate the emerging themes identified during the analysis.

The analysis of the interviews before and during the war raised serious questions related to the social work education of the colonized in the settler-colonial academy. These questions were intensified with the escalation of silencing, threats, and the politics of zero tolerance while witnessing the genocidal war on Gaza. The students' concerns became significantly more pronounced, complex, and emotionally charged, as reflected in discussions.

Consonant with FGT research's reflexive process, feminist theory engages in the politics of knowledge creation: it asks about the knower (Code, 1991), that is, the current research team. We are feminist, anticolonial, and Indigenous Palestinian women who are graduates of HU's social work school. Our roots, history, and current life circumstances have influenced our research tools, examinations, and writing. We believe that our subjectivities and experiences in the context of ongoing genocide allowed us to hear, see, center, unearth, and challenge the students' narrations, and they ultimately obliged us to side against genocide, interrupting racism and silencing while promoting anticolonial epistemologies.

Findings and discussion

This section presents and analyzes the central themes that emerged from the data. It begins by examining students' critical reflections on social work education, particularly in relation to its stated values and code of ethics, as they witnessed (and are still witnessing) genocide perpetrated by the settler state. The second theme explores the silencing and oppressive practices enacted by settler social work educators. Finally, the section addresses students' experiences of terrorizing violence carried out by settler peers within social work educational spaces.

The big lie: a "value-driven" profession supporting genocide

I expect that someone that chooses to study social work must believe in humanity principles, which are a fundamental value in the social work profession that we all learn. It means that all people are equal and that one child's wound is not more important than another child's wound ... human rights, women's rights, all these values are the basis of the social work profession. (Laila)

The International Federation of Social Work, along with studies on social work ethics and values (Abbott, 2003; Greeno et al, 2007; Akhtar, 2013), clearly identify human rights, dignity, and social justice as essential values in the code of ethics. To follow these values, researchers and professionals in social work advocate for anti-oppressive, or anti-discriminatory, practices developed in the 1980s, when there was increasing awareness of the impact of racism in society (Akhtar, 2013). Laila,³ whose words opened this section, believed that social work students and professors should uphold principles of humanity, justice, equality, and fairness and that social work professors and students should give proper and equal attention to the wounding, trauma, and pain of all women and children, regardless of their racial, national, religious, gender, or ethnic background.

However, Palestinian students questioned the implementation of social work values in their complex, politically conflicted reality, even by their own professors. Jihan, another Palestinian student, shared the following:

I chose to study social work to help other people who are in need, regardless of their origin or political views ... and in any context.... Aren't these social work profession values? Everything we learn is how to help people and make them feel safe.... But the profession in reality is different. Theory is something, and practice is something else.... The preservation of professional values is only for the Israeli students, not for us [Palestinians].... It is a lie, only talk, not all people have the same treatment.

Jihan indicated that applying social work values of help, shared humanity, equality, and justice in a settler-colonial and racialized reality and during an ongoing genocide revealed a hypocritical game. Rima, another student, reiterated that her experience in the social work program has shown her that "not all people are people.... We [Palestinians] are outside humanity." Rima and Jihan emphasized that the national and political context interrupts the practicing of the social work code of ethics and its

ability to help the Other and to assure their dignity, preservation of rights, and safety. [BlackDeer and Ocampo \(2022\)](#) have argued that the reality of social work practice continuously demonstrates the failure to achieve social work's code of ethics and noble values by maintaining white supremacy and harming marginalized communities, making the social work code of ethics a settler-colonial hearsay that maintains settler supremacy ([Dyson et al, 2020](#)). Moreover, [Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong \(2019\)](#) show how social work is used as a settler-colonial technology that constantly produces the settler state, as it contributes to its structure of elimination, often under the guise of being “helpful”—an argument that resonates with Rima's observation.

Salwa, another student, questioned the colonizers' ability to practice social work's values of tolerance and containment of the colonized Other, particularly under the clear instructions of “zero tolerance”:

The moment they produced the slogan of zero tolerance, all Palestinian students understood that there is no tolerance, that we all should shut up, walk on campus like ghosts, shut up, and disappear.... Our appearance ... our existence, our narrations bother them.... Only Israeli students' feelings, voices, and humanity can be.... We Palestinians should evaporate.

Scholars of social work have indicated that tolerance is a core value in social work that deeply influences the profession's effectiveness ([Valutis, 2015](#); [Nikitina et al, 2016](#); [Stoykov, 2019](#)). Tolerance underpins social work's commitment to humanity and to respecting and honoring diverse identities, beliefs, and experiences, which are essential to fostering a trusting and supportive relationship ([Valutis, 2015](#); [Nikitina et al, 2016](#); [Stoykov, 2019](#)). Researchers and educators in social work have argued that students need to learn to question and critique their own perspectives and those of others to develop the capacity to deal with complexity and to demonstrate responsible engagement ([Fenton and Smith, 2019](#); [Verkuyten, 2022](#)). Accordingly, open debate between Salwa and her colleagues necessitates that Salwa first feels safe to share and feels confident that she will be acknowledged as human, which Salwa never sensed, particularly given the university's “zero tolerance” policy toward Palestinian Indigenous narratives of loss and suffering.

The question remains whether social work scholars and faculty can educate and practice social work in a zero-tolerance environment during an ongoing genocide. What kind of social workers does a school create when students must invisibilize themselves and their humanity or jeopardize their safety to speak out? The voices of Laila, Rima, Salwa, and Jihan shed light on the racialized, exclusionary educational atmosphere for Palestinian students studying social work at HU. Their voices expose the silencing, intolerance, alienation, and racism experienced by Indigenous students in settler-colonial social work education. Such a situation undermines social work values and its code of ethics.

The disappointment: the faculty's militarization of social work

[Rogerson et al \(2022\)](#) have argued that educators are responsible for promoting ethical reflection in practice. According to them, faculty members exemplify core professional competencies when they acknowledge their own personal biases, allow for collaboration, empowerment, and participation in the classroom, and acknowledge

the role of bias in delivering and applying ethics and social justice. However, Areej's dispirited voice suggested otherwise. She said:

During the war on Gaza, I was disappointed by the social work faculty members that, prior to the war, sold us idealistic values and were amazing... The head of social work was ... fighting for all children's welfare and rights, Palestinian and Israelis alike ... then after the war [began], I was shocked ... he—in class—only mentioned the suffering of the Israeli children and not one word on the Palestinian children's pain. Aren't those children [Israelis] and those children [Palestinians]?... Then, bragging about his Zionist ideology ... discouraging.

Areej shared her feelings about HU's social work faculty following the genocidal war on Gaza. Before the outbreak of the war, she was fascinated by faculty members' idealism and articulation of the values of welfare, equality, and social justice. One of her Israeli professors had boasted about the ideal of "service for all children," insisting on his commitment and the commitment of the research institute he works with to serving all children, Israeli and Palestinian alike. However, once the war began, the same professor sent emails with photos advocating for Israeli children abducted on October 7, overlooking the suffering of the wounded, amputated, orphaned, traumatized, and killed Palestinian children of Gaza. Antithetical to the idea that all children are alike, his inability to see the wounds of all children left Areej in shock and despair. Areej's educational experience, as the lived experience of all respondents, stemmed from a senior faculty member who failed to see and acknowledge a genocide and, instead, let his political ideology and biases undermine his ethical, professional, academic, and collegial decision making and practice while lecturing students; he—as Areej insisted—not only contradicted social work values and its code of ethics but also silenced some by asserting politically and personally charged values as a reference for professional thinking and action.

The respondents' narration raises an ethical question about the nature and role of social work educators in a time of genocide: dealing with their own national identities and ideologies in the classroom while engaging with students and colleagues, how can they teach social workers to remain humane and nonjudgmental about others' values and cultural differences? Pawar et al (2020) have argued that it is necessary for social work educators to model ethical practice through teaching while valuing the lived experience of students and raising students' awareness of their own values. Rogerson et al (2022) have explained that a critical tool in conceptualizing and applying social justice stems from promoting students' ability to develop an ethical awareness of the many factors related to organizational and institutional oppression.

Sarah shared a different affective reaction to one of the faculty members, stating:

Today, I [a Palestinian student] sense that I am invisible, not noticed in the university ... when emotional discussions and talks in support of the [Israeli] military are all we hear in class.... So, the professor doesn't want to talk about the genocide in Gaza ... fine, but what about the agonies and losses of Palestinians in Jerusalem, in the West Bank? Is it only their [Israeli] losses?... It is so disturbing and painful to study social work for an entire year without discussing anything about my people ... and I started thinking ... am I not existing?

Sarah talked about her lived experience as a militarily occupied entity. She talked about the militarization of social work discussions in her class that turned a blind eye to her presence. She shared how puzzled she felt when, in lectures, her professors fully dismissed the genocide in Gaza and the daily suffering of Palestinians. Sarah said that throughout that academic year, her professors had predominantly centered the experiences, narratives, and voices of Israeli soldiers and the Israeli community.

The key question is not only how a colonized student of social work hears the traumatization of the colonizers during the genocide of her own people but also how the colonized student comprehends the cruelty of the deliberate dismissal of her people and their wounding and traumatization. [Stoler \(2016\)](#) argues that in colonial contexts, scholars have tended to sideline and pay little attention to some truths and realities while dedicating their attention to dominant realms, thereby delivering “myopic knowledge”. Sarah’s narration shows how a colonized student of social work in a genocidal, settler-colonial context not only loses interest in but also loses faith in and belonging to the profession and its values when social work educators center the narration, affect, and humanity of the colonizers to the exclusion of the colonized, that is, when her university and its educators are myopic to her narrative and complicit with her suffering.

Sarah, like many others, suggested that the myopic complicity of social work educators recreated racialization, excluding the colonized from human wounding and humanity, and demonstrating that the colonizer’s social work reproduces and continues hierarchies of settler colonialism and colonial superiority. In a similar analysis, [Lee and Ferrer \(2014\)](#) have shown how the social work profession can be complicit in continuing racial hierarchies through colonial and imperialist policies and practices toward Indigenous communities. [Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong \(2019\)](#) have confirmed that social work educators are complicit in settler-colonial violence when they recreate Indigenous suffering by manipulating Indigenous pain and acting as a buffer zone to further colonial dispossession.

Ameera further addressed the complicit and myopic behavior of social work educators:

During the lectures ... students are expected to share personal narrations ... so, Israeli students talk about their trauma, about the crises in Israel and the damage to the Israeli/Jewish society.... This is the language Israeli students and lecturers use ... as if my pain is not seen ... like I am not too [as Palestinian, not traumatized], they make you feel you are responsible for their trauma and crises.... I, as Palestinian, am only an aggressor, although the mass killing of Palestinian children, the demolitions, the displacements [occur].... These are unspoken issues ... although we are students of social work.

Ameera spoke in severe agony as she explained how Israeli social work professors and students not only disregarded Palestinian pain, wounding, and trauma during the war on Gaza but also blamed Palestinians, defined them as aggressors, and focused only on Israeli victimization. She further indicated that when Palestinians are occasionally invited to speak and share their stories in class, their narrations are unheard, as if they did not speak. Ameera’s voice illustrates the continuation of not only settler-colonial hierarchies and colonial supremacy but also settler-colonial grammars ([Calderon, 2014](#)) in the social work classroom. According to [Calderon \(2014\)](#), settler-colonial grammar

describes a double movement of recognition and erasure, or the absence–presence dialectic (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015). This process involves the contemporary presence of the indigene—here, letting the Indigenous speak in the classroom—while maintaining distance from the lived reality of the Indigenous. Thus, as Ameera's story reveals, even as she speaks, her suffering is unheard, unseen, and irrelevant to the discourse of trauma and humanity.

Najwa explained how settler-colonial grammar is also apparent in clinical work. She discussed the awkward position she experienced after her supervisor, or field instructor, repeatedly shared stories about her son, an Israeli soldier serving in Gaza. In a social work practicum, every student has a supervisor who assists and directs the student through defined practice areas (Marc et al, 2014). Scholars have noted the significant role of these field instructors, as they help students integrate knowledge, skills, and values of the profession into practice (Bogo, 2014; Ketner et al, 2017). They have also insisted that an effective relationship between student and supervisor must involve trust, emotional support, empathy, openness, and receptivity, must encourage expression, and must create a feeling of safety so students can discuss their difficulties without fear (Marc et al, 2014; Nickson et al, 2016; Ketner et al, 2017). However, a previous study indicated the difficulties and tensions that arise between Arab students and their Jewish supervisors as a result of the political violence embedded in their political context (Haj-Yahia and Roer-Strier, 1999). Such tension is apparent when Najwa indicated that instead of being encouraged by her supervisor to communicate her perspectives, feelings, and hardships during an agonizing genocidal war against her people, her supervisor's familial military stories overwhelmed, asphyxiated, and silenced her.

This begs the question of why Najwa's supervisor continuously shared her son's story without considering the anxiety it could create for Najwa, as her son might be targeting or killing Palestinians in Gaza, or how this knowledge may disrupt supervision. In such a context, the intersection of power relations extends beyond the professional and positional (Hair, 2018) to encompass racial, ethnic, and settler-colonial dimensions (Udah, 2021). This layered power dynamic is particularly evident in the relationship between Najwa and her Israeli supervisor, where the colonizer enacts authority over the colonized. The supervisor's power over the student's academic standing amplifies her social power to silence the student's experience. Their supervisory relationship is situated within a broader context of genocide, militarization, and systemic violence—conditions that materialize through mechanisms of domination, alienation, subalternation, subjection, and the silencing of Najwa's visibility, identity, affect, narrative, and imagined future. Yet, centering Najwa's silence as a colonized subject allows a different mode of agency to emerge—one that challenges dominant readings of silence as mere absence and, instead, reframes it as a site of resistance and survival. San Pedro (2015) has shown how native students use silence as a form of critical silent literacy in response to and to protect themselves from their teachers' microaggressions.

The question, then, is what can students learn from this suffocating relationship, particularly when the supervisor is a professional role model in relation to the fundamental skills of containment, understanding, and compassion (Ketner et al, 2017)? Najwa's ordeal points to the importance of the supervisory relationship, in which trusting a supervisor creates safety and develops and engages students with reflective practice (Ganzer and Ornstein, 2004; Egan et al, 2017). When the supervisory

relationship lacks trust, the relationship is compromised, suspicion and fear arise, and the supervisor's inability to facilitate a safe, reflective practice asphyxiates any potential for professional creativity and knowledge development (Egan et al, 2017).

Fatima also shared her sense of unsafety with one of her professors. The professor stated openly that she does not trust Palestinians and that she, a Jewish Israeli, can impose her decisions and force Palestinians to act in specific ways. Fatima's narration demonstrated the abuse of power and the resulting mistrust between the colonizer professor and the colonized student. As Fatima explained, the professor translated that mistrust into clear, spoken language, causing her severe apprehension. Fatima's story shows how the Israeli professor enacted settler power, supremacy, and subjugation—ironically, in a social work class. Fatima explained that, at first, she was angry with the professor's argument and tuned out her voice to shield herself because she feared it would harm her studies and future. Later, she decided to confront and speak out against the professor, refusing and struggling against the professor's warped account. However, rather than creating space for Fatima to share her perspective, the professor—operating not only from a positional and professional authority but also from the location of the settler during a moment of genocide—asserted an eliminatory argument. This interaction signaled to the Palestinian students that the professor was not a neutral educator but, rather, an active participant in the settler-colonial hierarchy and its discursive logic, effectively mobilizing the grammar and machinery of elimination and oppression inherent to settler colonialism. This revelation caused Fatima to feel ambushed and terrorized, mainly when her professor expected her to serve in the Israeli military, even against Fatima's will. However, Fatima chose to speak back, insisting on her national identity. She challenged the professor's opinion: she refused the use of the classroom as a battlefield, resisting the professor's reproduction of domination inside academia.

Rifles in social workspaces

While students like Fatima searched for modes of self-preservation and decolonization of the mind, the reality at the university was heavily militarized. Dalia and other interviewees shared photos and discussed with heavy hearts the militarization of the classroom. Dalia said, "We in class are three Arab females.... Someone noticed where we all sat and stood in front of us, pulled up his shirt to show his weapon, and sat in front of us ... and this is a student of social work." Khawla, another student, explained, "Even professors walk with their weapon on their bodies ... to tell us we are afraid of you [Palestinians].... She lectures and her weapon is on the desk in front of our faces ... and creates sadness and helplessness."

Dalia and Khawla described how they experienced the militarization of the social work classroom while encountering armed Israeli colleagues and professors. They explained how they sensed the threat of the weapons displayed in social work classrooms, creating a sense of being targeted and learning a caring profession with a killing machine in class. While Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2020) shows how the Israeli occupation's "gun to body" policy affects childhood, respondents in our study showed us that the gun was pointed at the Palestinian body, mind, and futurity.

Sawsan reiterated the fear, terrorization, and frustration that Dalia felt:

Today, we have more rifles than laptops... Why are weapons in an educational surrounding? This tells me that this space is not for me but is based on my account ... so I tell the professor that weapons in class are scary, and students behind me shout back ... "This is security" ... and mind you ... this is social work.

Sawsan, like most respondents, noted how the school of social work was heavily militarized during the genocide, repeatedly saying, "We see more rifles than laptops." According to Sawsan, the professor kept her gun with her because she was afraid of being attacked at any time or place. Sawsan was puzzled by such justifications for guns in the classroom—a social work educational space and space of containment, equality, and social justice. She clearly told her professor and colleagues that weapons in class terrorize her, but her Israeli fellow students and educators insisted that the weapons are there for Israeli security: "to protect them from her, as a Palestinian student, the dangerous Other." Hanan, another student, pointed to the gun to body policy and psychic performativity on campus, adding, "Just look at the amount of flags in our department and machine guns ... I feel I am not seen ... not visible."

Hanan referred to the scene in the social work school following October 7. Many Israeli students carried their weapons while studying. In addition, the school's public spaces, classrooms, corridors, and lobby were packed with Israeli flags, turning the social work space of inclusion into one of national supremacy, discrimination, and exclusion, an indication that spaces of social work at HU are an extension of the settler-colonial state's power outside university walls. [Shalhoub-Kevorkian \(2017\)](#) discusses the occupation of the senses and the aesthetic of power, showing how settler-colonial violence uses actual, aesthetic, and sensory stimuli, such as flags, to further penetrate and declare ownership.

Living with daily racism during this genocide was not limited to the physical space of the campus and the classroom. Sama shared her experience of racism and exclusion in the social work students' cyberspace: "Some right-wing radicals created problems during our first year, sending WhatsApp messages [to the social work students' group] that there is no Palestine.... I got so outraged ... [and] wanted to cry." Sama's experience in the WhatsApp group demonstrates how the settler's intimidation, erasure, and elimination continue to shape the experiences of Palestinians through cyberspace. Many scholars have shown how settler-colonial machineries of oppression and silencing ([Tawil-Souri and Aouragh, 2014](#); [Qannam and Eisheh, 2023](#); [Veracini and Weaver-Hightower, 2023](#)) penetrate cyberspace, creating "digital colonialism" ([Veracini and Weaver-Hightower, 2023](#)) and revealing how the "battlefield" extends to the Internet ([Bevilacqua, 2022](#)).

Nour expanded on the violence of students' cyber-groups by pointing to the way Israeli students used the groups to assert their ideological position and send political messages decorated with Israeli signs and flags. Nour asked: "What do you think will happen if we share the Palestinian flag?" Palestinian students like Nour shared their affective reactions, their disappointment with their classmates' violence, as well as their agency and refusal to accept such cyberbullying. Nour explained how social work practice in the context of settler-colonial genocide seems contradictory and fails to contain existential tensions. Her narration goes hand-in-hand with scholars who have explained the tensions between social work theory and practice ([Wilson, 2008](#); [Higgins and Goodyer, 2015](#); [Maylea, 2021](#); [Bhuyan et al, 2023](#)) and those who

have demonstrated its complicity in perpetuating oppressive features (Lee and Ferrer, 2014; Morley and Ablett, 2016). Nour and others pointed to the way WhatsApp groups participated in promoting racial exclusivity and exclusion.

Another student, Jana, refused to accept militarism and racism as a reality that she should live with and explained how she insisted on bringing the Palestinian voice and condition to class. She said, “I always made sure I brought up life under occupation in my neighborhood in detail ... and talked about oppression, about family dismemberment, children’s precarious lives, and Palestinian rights to mental health ... to dignity and humanity.” Jana showed how she does not give in to the silencing, complicity, myopia, and biases of her professors and colleagues at the social work school; rather, she resists settler-colonial power and logics by recentering her Indigenous voice, truth, and narration in the classroom. Jana insisted on humanizing her community by demanding their fundamental right to human dignity as a social work priority. To do so, Jana suggested that her community must be decolonized to live a life free of violence and entrapment. Jana’s decolonial approach as a social work student at HU insisted on rejecting the colonial conditions inherent in military occupation (Bahdi and Kassis, 2018), and she advocated for dismantling militarized checkpoints, tearing down the separation wall, abolishing family separation laws, stopping home demolitions, building more schools and parks for Palestinian children, and stopping the genocide against Gazans. Centering Jana’s refusal reconfigures the act of voicing her lived reality within the settler-colonial academy—as well as her Palestinian peers’ silence and affective expressions of resentment—as resistance. From a feminist perspective, both speech and silence can be politically charged modes of refusal that disrupt dominant power structures (hooks, 2000). In this context, these refusals challenge the legitimacy of settler-colonial domination over the subjugated Other and call for the decolonization of knowledge, pedagogy, and institutional power within the university (Mikulan and Zembylas, 2024).

Conclusion: challenging complicit, militarized social work education

I believe that the social work profession can prevent oppression, but in our context at HU, it maintained a social order that erases the Other ... educators and researchers here look at us [Palestinians] in zoological manner ... they are totally disconnected from our realities ... and I, as a Palestinian student, a member of a community under a genocide, I fully dismiss the colonizer’s sense of supremacy and defy social work educators’ complicity with militarized oppression. (Saud)

These words are from Suad, a Palestinian student who shared them in class and with us. Her words echo Fanon’s (1963) claim that settlers construct natives in zoological terms, while engaging with feminist and Indigenous theoretical frameworks highlights the native’s persistent refusal and acts against such zoologization. Suad’s refusal, in this context, constitutes an active politics of dissent against settler colonialism (Mikulan and Zembylas, 2024) and a call for the decolonization of social work education and practice (Tamburro, 2013; Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong, 2019).

So, what is the role of social work education and educators in the context of genocide? To act against its brutality, or to be complicit with it? To mobilize to prevent its continuation, or to pacify any acts of resistance? To contain students affected by

it, or to mobilize students who support the genocide and offer them sustenance? To build educational and intervention programs to attend to its ramifications? Examining social work education during an ongoing genocide aids us in unpacking the role of social work education and educators as they operate within a settler-colonial matrix of power.

The results of the study expose the failure of social work education and educators to uphold social work values, perpetuating cycles of violence and asphyxiating professional creativity. The ontological reduction of humans and humanity, as the respondents narrated, implies an active process of social work education and educators articulating an oppressive and racist ideological perspective, creating an educational politics of "gun to body," "gun to mind," and "more rifles than laptops" in systems of higher education. This perpetuation does not just violate social work education, its values, spaces, discourses, and interactions; it weaponizes them, further violating the mandate of social work education and the social work profession.

Within this context, social work educators, particularly those situated in institutions of higher education embedded in colonizing structures, hold a profound ethical and professional responsibility to center the lived realities and sociopolitical contexts of colonized students, especially during periods of genocidal violence. The dereliction of social work education in meaningfully addressing students' immediate contexts and the realities of ongoing genocide has not only silenced their experiences but also eroded their trust in the profession's professed ethical, justice, and human rights commitments. Teaching future generations requires not only acknowledging the wounding of the Other, enabling voices of dissent, and centering humanity and justice for all; it necessitates the intentional cultivation of decolonial thinking and praxis in the classroom. In the midst of genocide, educators are ethically and professionally obligated to confront the zoologization of the Other, resist genocidal aggression, and refuse the weaponization of academic spaces, ensuring that education itself does not become complicit in sustaining oppressive structures.

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Notes

¹ An Instagram post appeared on HU's official Instagram page on October 11, 2023 (Hebrew University, 2023: our translation):

Zero tolerance for students who express support for acts of terrorism, including immediate suspension. In these days of deep sorrow and agonizing concern for the fate of the abducted, captive and missing, we would like to assure each and every one of you—those called to serve (in the Israeli army) or those of you who have been hurt personally or in a wider circle—that we will do everything, emphasizing everything, to help you on a personal level to integrate with your studies. The University will ensure that all reserve soldiers, who protect the lives of all of us, will be able to successfully complete their studies [as well as] those who are absent because of their military service. Come back safely. We will continue to stand and support the national effort and the resilience of the Israeli country. In addition, Hebrew University will reveal zero tolerance toward students who show support for acts of terror and Hamas's horrific murder attack, including their

immediate exclusion. It is strictly forbidden to publish expressions of incitement to terrorism, violence, or racism. If you come across such advertisements (posts), please contact us in private. We all wish for better days.

As part of its ongoing surveillance and censorship policy, the Israeli government has classified any protest in solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza, whether on social media or any other platform, as “supporting terrorism” or “sympathizing with terror organizations.” For further details, see [Adalah \(2023; 2025\)](#).

² The authors received many of these emails, and participants in the study shared that they also received similarly signed emails.

³ All participants’ names in this article are pseudonyms.

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Research ethics statement

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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