

Policy Brief

Towards Gender Justice in Higher Education Institutions Piloting ILO's Participatory Gender Audit tool at Birzeit University



International
Labour
Organization



Background

There continues to be a significant gender gap in labour force participation within the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). While men's labour force participation rate has remained steady since 2000 (registering 69% percent by June 2013), women's labour force participation rate has remained less than a quarter of men's rate, albeit rising from 13 percent in 2000 to 19 percent by June 2015. A significant gender pay gap also persists as women's median daily wage is only 84 percent of men's.

Comparative to other sectors, the Palestinian education sector employs a high number of women. However, the culture prevalent within this sector perpetuates strong gender-based inequalities. There are, for instance, far fewer women employed by higher education institutions, particularly in academic positions.

In the OPT, the ILO is working to improve access to equal employment opportunities for women through the creation of decent jobs, and improvement of working conditions, as well as legal, economic and social empowerment. Using a participatory approach, the ILO provides support to stakeholders to perform gender evaluations and formulate evidence-based policies that empower women in the OPT to organize and enter the workplace.

Between 2013 and 2015, the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University, in collaboration with the ILO, carried out a Participatory Gender Audit to map the institutional gender gaps and highlight the different patterns and forms of discrimination facing women at the university. The audit was useful in assessing the extent to which internal university policies, regulations and practices enhance or inhibit gender equality, and to identify the ways in which they impact on women's participation, representation and career advancement.

Birzeit University is a non-governmental public university located in Birzeit, West Bank, with a long history as an educational institution committed to improving opportunities for women and girls. Established in 1924 as an elementary school for girls, it later expanded its scope to become a co-educational secondary school in 1930, and subsequently a university in 1975. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations stemming from the Participatory Gender Audit will be genuinely endorsed by the University and contribute to women's advancement through the future development of gender-specific policies and tools.

Research Methodology

Data was collected from Birzeit University's Human Resources Department, the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Graduate Studies Program. Using ILO's Participatory Gender Audit tool, this information was then used to map all female and male positions, roles, responsibilities and opportunities within the institution. The tool was also useful in enabling the university research team to identify the internal structural and cultural obstacles

that limit the potential for women's participation and advancement. Additional research methods were employed to complement the Participatory Gender Audit tool, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with faculty members, general staff and students. A self-administered questionnaire was also disseminated to these three stakeholder groups.

Research findings

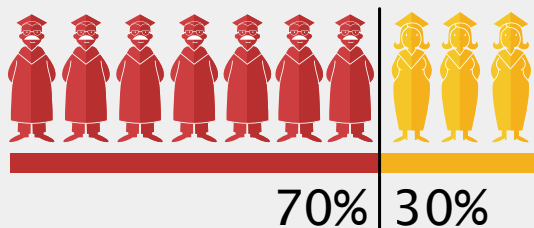
Distribution of men and women across all sectors of Birzeit University

The university has successfully enrolled a high number of women as undergraduate students.

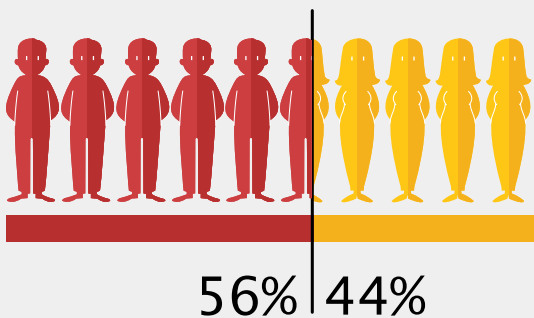
However, low female representation remains, particularly among academic staff.

● In total, the university has:

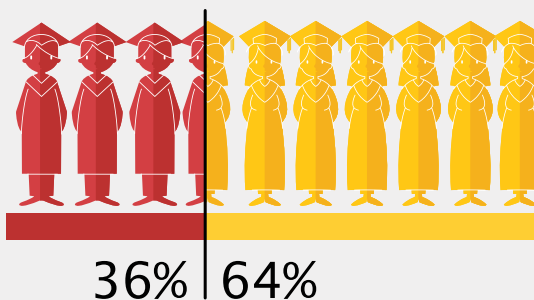
389 faculty members, of whom 30% are women



● 448 general employees, of whom 44% are women



● 12,101 undergraduate students, of whom 64% are women



Faculty members: Gender gaps and trends

Compared with their male counterparts, there are comparatively few female faculty members occupying high-ranking academic posts. Rank is a determining factor that qualifies a faculty member for a senior position within the organisational hierarchy. A higher rank offers greater financial benefits, academic status, and authority within the university.

Faculty members are eligible for tenure (a permanent staff position) once promoted to the rank of Associate Professor or higher. 2.8% of female faculty members are in either Associate Professor or full Professor's roles, in contrast to 14% of male faculty members. A faculty member with a tenured position is entitled to special privileges including one year's paid sabbatical leave for academic advancement.

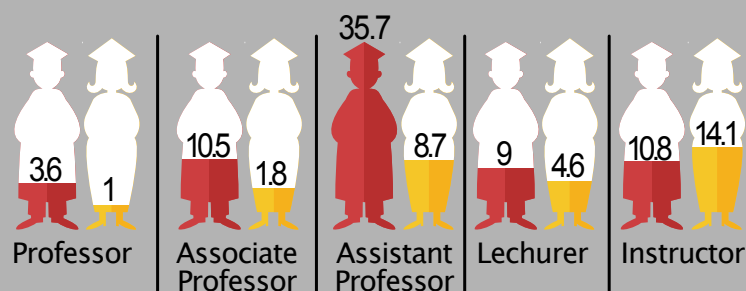
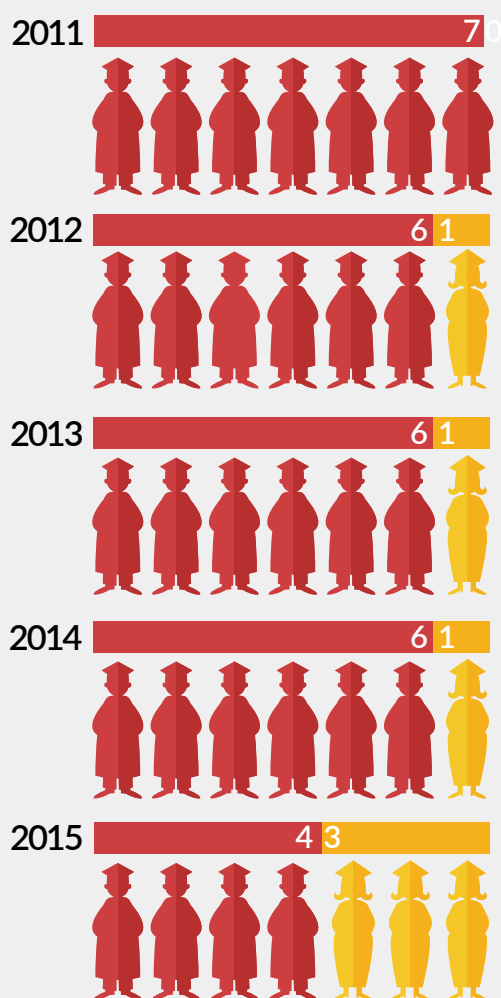


Figure 2. Percentage (%) of male and female faculty members by rank

It is evident from analysing the quantitative data collected over a six-year time span (2010- 2015) that women faculty members are promoted to higher status positions at a slower pace than men. Qualitative data shows that this is mostly on account of women's domestic roles and family responsibilities within the household. Women expressed reluctance and concern with taking on additional research tasks beyond their teaching workloads. Additional research gives applicants a competitive edge when seeking promotion.

Recent efforts to redress this gender imbalance have resulted in near equal representation of men and women on the university's Promotion and Tenure Committee. As of 2015, women held three (out of a total seven) positions within the Committee; a substantial increase from 2011 when the Committee had no women members.



Number of men and women in the Promotion and Tenure Committee, 2010 -2015.

General employees: Gender gaps and trends

Similar to faculty members, men tend to occupy most of the senior general staff (administrative, financial and service sector) roles. As of 2015, there were no women directors of units at the university, and only a small number of women fill positions as head of units.

Directors



Head of Unit



Number of male and female senior employees

In terms of employment contract types, there are a slightly higher number of men (86%) versus women (82%) on regular contracts. However, the main gender gap exists with regard to 'special' contracts, which are held by more women (15%) than men (9%). Special contracts are used to hire general employees for short-term projects, and the job terminates at the end of the project period. Although special contracts typically pay a higher salary than regular contracts, they offer neither job security nor additional benefits.

The privatisation of various university services, particularly cleaning and food services, has disproportionately and adversely impacted female workers as they predominately employ older, unskilled women. These workers earn minimum-wage salaries and describe their jobs as arduous, with no formal employment contracts, job security, vacations nor other benefits. Working conditions are poor and workers are not eligible to become members of the union for faculty members and university employees.

Undergraduate students: Gender gaps and trends

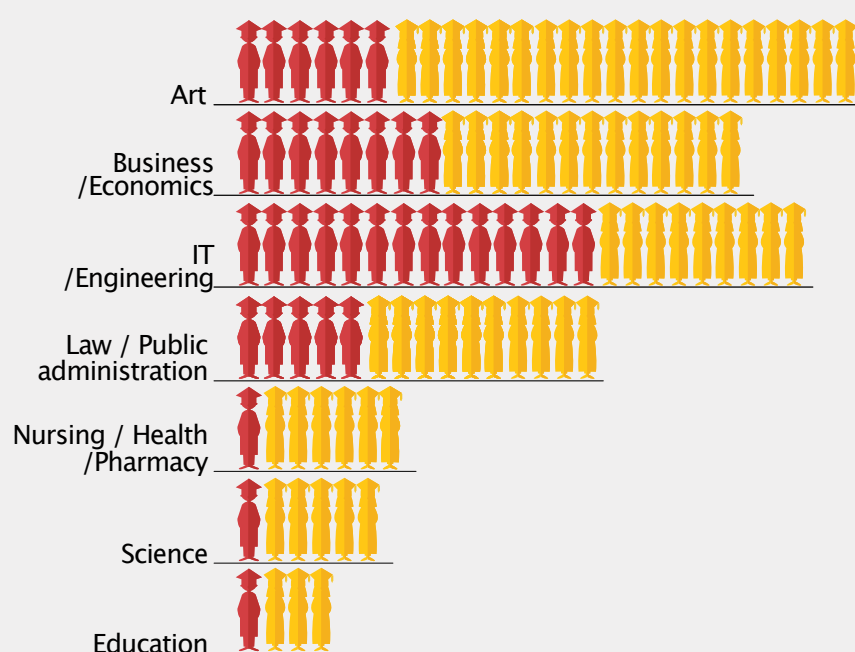
There are more women than men enrolled as undergraduate students across all academic disciplines of Birzeit University, with the exception of engineering and IT. Such findings may point to a shift in traditional gender roles among a younger generation and cultural shift among the broader socio-demographic population in the OPT. Young women are starting to show interest in fields of study that have historically been dominated by men, such as business and economics.

Higher rates of female student enrolments are due to a number of different factors. On average, female students have higher

scholastic scores required for enrolment, as per the university's acceptance criteria. Men typically have greater opportunities to travel abroad, or are obliged to find employment immediately after they finish school in order to financially support their families.

Additionally, families may prefer that their daughters study at local institutions within close proximity to their homes. This is confirmed by looking at geographical data which shows the majority of female students come from the middle region of the West Bank, where Birzeit University is located, while a majority of male students come from regions in the north and south.

Despite the overall high number of female students, they are poorly represented on student committees and the student council. The research findings also show a lack of awareness among female students of different services offered by the university, including psychological counselling. Although counselling services are available to students, there is a limited number of counsellors and it is difficult for students to obtain an appointment. This may impede students to report cases of sexual harassments. Such cases are also likely to go unreported as the university does not have a formal body to address such incidents.



Percentage (%) of male and female students enrolled in various academic disciplines

Summary of key findings

- The majority of undergraduate students at Birzeit University are women. Female students out-number male students in nearly all academic disciplines, including some fields of study that have been traditionally dominated by men. Such findings may point to a shift in traditional gender roles among this generation and the socio-demographic population in the OPT.
- There remains, however, low representation of women in faculty member staff positions. Additionally, men continue to occupy most high-ranking academic and employee staff positions.
- The university has made a few recent efforts to ensure greater gender equity, such as increasing the number of women faculty members on the Promotion and Tenure Committee. While this is a positive step towards gender equality, a systematic and concerted approach is needed across the institution more broadly.
- Internal strategies, policies and practices are typically gender-neutral and do not take into account factors that inhibit the equal representation of women in the workplace. The limited representation of women in faculty and higher level of general staff positions within the institutional hierarchy will persist unless gender-specific policies and tools are developed to bridge this gap.

Recommendations

Lessons can be learned from the Birzeit University pilot study with regard to gender justice and mainstreaming in higher education institutions. A strong internal commitment by the university's administration is necessary to ensure appropriate policies and practices are in place to redress gender inequalities and improve the status of women. On the basis of the Participatory Gender Audit results, and data collected via accompanying research processes, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration by the university's administration:

1 Birzeit University announced in September 2015 that it has plans to establish a 'Gender Monitor' system that will allow for the integration of gender concerns into institutional philosophy and practice. The introduction of a Gender Monitor will be an invaluable step forward and efforts should be made to ensure it is adopted as a permanent structure within the university. Experts on gender issues and experienced individuals equipped with relevant expertise should form an Executive Central Committee on Gender, supported by a number of gender focal persons who sit across various units of the university. The mandate of the Gender Committee should:

- Formulate an in-depth definition of the concept of gender justice in relation to social justice, equity, decent work and empowerment, and to make these concepts relevant to the Palestinian context.
- Revise current systems and develop gender-specific policies and procedures that take into account women's concerns and circumstances and encourage the bridging of the gender gap. This includes a policy of affirmative action, including a quota system to increase women's representation in managerial positions and their participation in staff and student

committees. Consideration should also be given to the development of policies and services that alleviate women's household responsibilities, including paid maternity leave and on-campus childcare facilities.

- Introduce 'gender budgeting' within the university to support the capacity building of staff and ensure funding is available for paid sabbaticals and research grants that would allow female faculty members of lower seniority the time to engage in research, enhance their productivity and expand their opportunities for future promotion.

- Develop goals, indicators, and a baseline, and monitor the adoption of gender policies to evaluate progress over time.

- Develop an Action Plan that mainstreams these gender-specific policies and procedures by gradually introducing the required changes in a realistic yet timely manner.

- Develop internal mechanisms and processes for dealing with cases of gender-based violence and sexual harassment, including the implementation of clear and appropriate penalties.

- Raise awareness of gender issues through workshops and seminars to familiarise faculty and general staff members on key concerns and the importance of advancing the status of women within the institution.

2 Improve gender awareness in the Union of Faculty Members and Employees to encourage understanding of key issues and ensure that employees support the work of the Gender Monitor system.

3 Review and reform university policies relating to the privatisation of services, particularly food and cleaning services, to ensure workers are afforded greater protections in accordance with the Labour Law, and to ensure they are eligible for membership with the Union of Faculty Members and Employees.