

Personality of the Month II



Sama Fayeze Aweidah

A Defender of Palestinian Human Rights

Sama Fayeze Aweidah was born in Jerusalem in 1959. When she was 11 years old, she lost her father and had a difficult life after that. Based on customs and traditions, it was not possible for her mother to live in her home alone with three daughters. Now that the family had no male members, Sama and her mother and sisters had to leave their home and move in with her grandmother. She not only had lost her father but her home as well.

When Sama joined Jerusalem's Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) club, she met male and female adolescents of her age who were preoccupied with thinking about issues of youth, freedom, and the homeland. Thus began a new path in her life. She became active at her school, Ramallah Secondary School for Girls, defending the rights of the Palestinian people, and participated in various public and national activities that called for respect for the rights of the Palestinian people. She studied business administration at Birzeit University and obtained a master's degree in management at University College London.

During her participation in the national struggle, Sama became aware of the blatant discrimination against women and girls that prevents many women and girls from accessing and benefiting from the available community resources. She was among a group of women and girl activists who established the Union of Palestinian Women's Action Committees, the first grassroots feminist framework in Palestine. It comprises activists from various Palestinian political organizations and parties who work on the economic, political, and social empowerment of women. Next, Sama participated in the establishment of the Women's Studies Center (WSC) Jerusalem and served on its board of trustees. Here, she worked on drawing up the center's various work programs that aim to empower women and girls according to the three tracks of change: the academic track that focuses on research and studies to diagnose the problems and obstacles faced by women and girls and the ways in which they can overcome them; the educational track that relies on instilling ideas of change among different generations through work with schools, universities, and clubs; and the empowerment track that aims to bring about change through the force of law. Through lobbying and influencing campaigns to change laws

and promote equality, Sama worked with members of the center to draw up and implement many projects and programs until, in 1992, she was appointed general director of the center.

Sama represented WSC in the establishment of the Arab Women's Forum (Aisha) that was formed by women's organizations from eight Arab countries, including Palestine. She was elected for two cycles as the forum's general coordinator, which led her to work with women's organizations in various Arab countries, coordinating many joint



projects, exchanging experiences, and leading pressure and advocacy campaigns for change.

Sama has authored fourteen children's stories that aim to educate children about the importance of gender equality, empower girls, and educate children about sexual harassment and ways to avoid it or deal with it if it occurs. These stories have been used in joint programs between the WSC and the Palestinian Ministry of Education. Specifically, she initiated a program to promote the rights of the girl child and the "Aman" program that deals with sexual harassment. In addition, she helped develop training manuals for school counselors and engaged in teaching them to implement the two programs with students of both sexes.

In 2022, Sama was fiercely attacked by one of the so-called Islamist political

parties that accused her of spreading vice through her stories and the training manuals she provided. They considered that talking about gender is contrary to *sharia*, Islamic law. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education suspended joint programs with WSC based on this campaign. Supported and endorsed by many Palestinian human rights organizations, Sama has filed complaints with the cybercrime prosecution office and the attorney general in Palestine, but no action has been taken so far.

In 2022, Sama won the Franco-German Human Rights Defenders Award and was chosen to serve as Commissioner for Human Rights by the International Commission for Human Rights in Palestine (ICHR). She remains steadfast in her commitment to feminist thought and continues to work on behalf of girls and women in Palestine, defending their social, political, and economic rights and their right to live self-determined lives.

SCAN
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