

EMBARGO: Tuesday 24th November 2015

Educating Palestinian women now a 'risk'

Co-Operative Bank closes Sheffield charity account

Sheffield Palestine Women's Scholarship Fund is a local charity which currently supports 43 Palestinian women to go to university in the Gaza Strip, one of the world's poorest regions. The Fund pays for their university fees, enabling women to study subjects ranging from engineering to Arabic, from medicine to law. According to the letter sent to the Fund by the Co-Operative Bank, we no longer fit their 'risk appetite'. The Bank that prides itself on its ethical credentials sees educating women as a risk.

And we are not alone. Another 20ⁱ organisations working for Palestine have also had their accounts closed or denied. This includes Sheffield Palestine Solidarity Campaign which campaigns for human rights and justice for the Palestinians. Another account being closed is Yorkshire Palestine Cultural Exchange which raise funds for children's projects and cultural exchanges between the people of Sheffield and the people of Palestine. We join together to condemn the actions of the Bank which is undermining legitimate, rights-based campaigning and humanitarian work alike.

National Palestine Solidarity Campaign have had their account closed and their legal team believe the decision is discriminatory and contravenes the Equality Act 2010. They have today initiated legal proceedings against the Bank. Sarah Colborne, PSC's Director said "The Co-operative Bank are very good at professing their ethical principles. They have glossy 27 page document which proclaims they believe in 'acting with honesty and transparency... treating customers fairly, [and] promoting human rights and equality'. It is very hard to see any evidence of these principles today. Instead they have closed the accounts of those working for human rights and equality for Palestine, offering no honest or transparent explanation – only banking jargon; 'risk appetite'."

The action by the Co-Operative Bank is putting 43 women's university degrees in jeopardy. The Fund receives over £600 per month in standing orders and we have been given only two months' notice to close the account with no help offered by the Bank. Although it will be possible to switch to another bank, the process of transferring the large number of regular monthly contributions will be an administrative burden and could lead to a loss of income.

The people of Sheffield have found it in their hearts to support Palestinian women's right to education, despite the ongoing Israeli siege. The Scholarship Fund had hoped their bank would have the same heart. The Co-Operative Bank has proven us wrong.

Notes to editor

For further information on the Scholarship Fund please call Sara Gowen, 0774 705 3109, e: saragowen@btinternet.com

For further information on Yorkshire Palestine Cultural Exchange, please call Paul Keleman, 0741 251 055, e: paulkeleman@blueyonder.co.uk

For further information on Sheffield Palestine Solidarity Campaign, please call Hilary Smith, 07818 040 982, e: hilarysmith23@hotmail.com

ⁱ List of Palestine support groups who have had their accounts closed or denied:

1. Abergavenny Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) branch
2. Abu Bakr Rauf Memorial Scholarship Fund
3. Boycott Israel Network
4. Bristol PSC branch
5. Cambridge PSC branch
6. Computers for Palestine
7. Discover Palestine
8. International Women's Peace Service Palestine
9. Liverpool Friends of Bil'in
10. Norwich PSC branch
11. Northern Palestine Solidarity Network
12. Nottingham PSC branch
13. Oxford PSC branch
14. Plymouth PSC branch
15. Saddleworth Women's Scholarship Fund
16. Sheffield PSC branch
17. Sheffield Palestine Women's Scholarship Fund
18. West Midlands PSC branch
19. York PSC branch
20. Yorkshire Palestine Cultural exchange

Quotes from our students:

I would like to thank the women of Sheffield who have helped us overcome these difficult times, who have supported us in completing our studies. It's no secret the difficult economic situation for Palestinian families. My father doesn't work and I study pharmacy in Al Azhar University. I have a sister who also studies at university and my father can't afford to pay for both our fees.

The last attack on Gaza was very painful and difficult for everyone. On a personal level, our neighbours' house was bombed. They got a warning message and we were worried, nervous and afraid, as we collected memories from our own house, not knowing day or night when the bombs would hit. A week later they did bomb our neighbours' house. Our house was partially demolished too, but thankfully no one was hurt. We went home, cleaned the rubble and sat in the intact part of the house. These were difficult times.

Again I would like to thank everyone who has helped us.

Dalia Tayser Abu Shamala

My name is Haneen Al Raey. I got an average of 86.4% at high school. Our financial circumstances didn't allow me to finish my university degree because of the attack on Gaza and the destruction it caused, which affected houses, mosques and anything that moved, which led to my father becoming unemployed.

If this scholarship wasn't available I wouldn't have been able to finish my studies, given how high the university fees are. We were living in such fear and apprehension as if death surrounded us. We live in the Al Zaytoon area. A store behind us was bombed and we saw the rockets fall and reduce it to rubble. When we first saw the rockets fall we thought they were aimed at us. It was terrifying. I thank Sheffield's women for their great efforts to help the students of Gaza.

I would like to start by thanking everyone who has helped me and my colleagues complete our university studies. I am a very ambitious student. I strive to achieve the highest of marks, in safe and normal conditions, away from problems and psychological torment that the recent attack has left in the Gaza Strip.

May such an attack never occur again.

Thank you.

Dina Yousef Salout