



## Standing Outside the Zoom Box

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*Based on a case study by Prof. Zehavit Gross, Head of the UNESCO Chair in Education for Values, Tolerance and Peace and Head of the Van-Gelder Center for Holocaust Instruction & Research, School of Education, Bar Ilan University*

Despite the late hour, conversation in Professor Avram's class was lively as students debated changing gender roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy.

"I hear you that more jobs are open to women, but that doesn't mean women actually have more freedom," Michal declared, bobbing up and down in her Zoom square, a messy bed half-visible in the background. "They're still responsible for most of the care work *and* they're still at high risk of harassment or assault. So women's choices are constrained by what is safe and what fits into their domestic responsibilities. It's the illusion of freedom, not the actuality."

"Gil, go ahead and unmute," Professor Avram nodded.

"You're making women sound like passive victims!" Gil protested. "If tech startups and the IDF are offering women jobs, then they have the freedom to take them—and to tell their husbands to help out at home. How can you expect to achieve gender equality if you make choices that reinforce gender stereotypes?"

"Fatima?" Professor Avram prompted.

"Um, I don't know that I'd put it quite like Gil did, but I agree that women will be better off in the workplace and at home when men take on domestic responsibilities too. It can't all fall—oh!" Fatima suddenly interrupted herself as a man's silhouette appeared in the doorway behind her. "Um, I forgot what I was going to say. Go on to the next person."

"I think you were starting to say that it can't all fall on women to make the changes at home?" Professor Avram encouraged her. "How do you see this happening?"

Fatima glanced toward the man who was entering the room, pulling her headscarf tighter around her hair as she did so. "I don't remember. Can you come back to me later?"

"Sure," Professor Avram responded, surprised. Fatima was normally one of the strongest students in the class; it wasn't like her to lose her train of thought like that. "David? I think you're next, then Mohammed."

As David spoke, Professor Avram sent a private message to Fatima. *Are you okay?*

*Yes, thanks.* Fatima DM'ed back. *Just tired.*

The debate continued, with students challenging each other on a variety of issues both verbally and in the written chat. "How can they type and listen simultaneously?" Professor Avram had

marveled to her husband over Shabbat dinner the previous week. “It’s like this generation was born to multitask, while I can barely remember to unmute.”

As the conversation continued, Professor Avram noticed that Fatima seemed withdrawn. Usually Fatima leaned into the camera, filling the screen with her eager smile, but now her chair was tilted back at an angle, and she kept turning to the side with a worried look.

“What’s happening?” Professor Avram wondered. She quickly scanned the chat—nothing she could see from Fatima, except the one DM. “This really isn’t like her,” she thought.

Professor Avram pulled her attention back to the discussion just as Aliya said, “This is like Fatima’s presentation last month. We have to work together to change the culture, not just expect the invisible hand to do it for us.”

“Great point, Aliya,” Professor Avram interjected. “Fatima, why don’t you remind us about your really powerful argument for reimagining gender equality. It would be a great way for us to wrap up our last two minutes of class today.”

Fatima startled. Keeping her computer on mute, she shook her head “no” and looked again to her side.

“Yeah, Fatima,” Aliya said, seeming not to notice. “You put it so eloquently!”

Slowly, Fatima shifted back toward her camera and clicked on her microphone. In the background, the class could hear a man talking angrily and banging something. Fatima flinched and turned her camera toward the wall.

“I don’t really know that I said we should change the culture,” Fatima amended. “Like maybe just tweak it a bit. Women have a lot they can achieve in the home, too, and maybe we just need to respect that more.”

The class erupted. “What?? That’s not what you said last month!” “What century is this?” The sound was chaotic—Professor Avram couldn’t tell whom to listen to, and the quickly flashing Zoom boxes certainly weren’t helping. The chat was suddenly filling up, too:

*I don’t think Fatima means what she says. Listen to what’s going on behind her. I think she’s in danger.*

*Just because you hear a man talking loudly in Arabic you suddenly interpret her as being in danger? Maybe you just didn’t listen well enough the first time.*

*This is what Michal was talking about at the beginning of class: how women still aren’t free to do or say what they think.*

*Don’t assume that you can tell who’s free and who’s not.*

*Just give her a break.*

*But did you see how she had to pull her scarf tighter?*

*Why is everyone focused on Fatima? This is exactly what we were talking about last week: Arabs get singled out for surveillance while Jews get a pass. We didn’t all jump on Anat when her kids were screaming in the background on Tuesday and say that maybe*

*her kids were being abused. It's racist to even be chatting about this. People's private lives are their own business.*

*It's not racist to be worried about a classmate who seems to be frightened of someone in her own home.*

*The private IS the public – isn't that the point of this class?*

Professor Avram felt overwhelmed. Class was ending, and she could barely keep up with what students were saying and writing. Students were also signing off; Fatima was gone, she noticed, as were the other three Arab students in the class.

What, if anything, should Professor Avram say to the students who were left? What, if anything, should she do about Fatima? How could she help the class get back on track with one another the next time they met—and what should that even look like?