

27. Gender Policy in Family and Society among Palestinian Citizens of Israel: Outside and Inside Influences

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Introduction

This article attempts to analyze and discuss the issue of the lack of gender equality in Palestinian society in Israel. It focuses on the dialectics of a complex of influences, the intersection of factors stemming from Israel's policies as a sovereign state toward its Palestinian minority on the one hand and factors stemming from the consideration of the society of Palestinian citizens of Israel toward its male and female members, on the other hand.

The scope of this article is too short to describe, in its introduction, the massive activity, fieldwork and the rapid positive changes that Palestinian women are experiencing in the public and private spheres. The article therefore focuses on an examination of the factors imposed by the State of Israel and those acting on the side of Palestinian society that lead to the continuation of gender discrimination in that society.

The first main argument presented here is: The society of Palestinian citizens of Israel is characterized by both traditionalism and modernity, conservatism and change that are experienced simultaneously, integrated within its daily life and in the main these processes coexist in harmony.¹ It is impossible to understand these dynamics without understanding the intersectionality between official institutions of the State of Israel and the institutions of Palestinian society. Intersectionality relates to the influence of the intersection between practices or systems of oppression, hegemony and discrimination.

The second main argument is therefore that outside factors, represented by state institutions act together with internal factors represented by patriarchal figures in Palestinian society to exert different forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression, both overt and covert, on individuals and groups in Palestinian society that shape policy regarding social stratification and gender within it.

Systemic institutionalized oppression takes place when laws, customs and practices reflect and create a lack of equality based on the membership of the individual in a particular social group. If the circumstances of oppression are imposed through

¹ Abu-Baker 2012.

institutional laws, customs and practices, then the institution is considered oppressive, whether the individuals working in that institution intend to oppress or not.²

Historical, cultural, national and geographic reasons have meant that various cultural influences act on Palestinian citizens of Israel simultaneously, and each of them in turn generates unique acculturation and socialization processes. These influences include: firstly, the State of Israel, including its institutions, laws and culture. This factor exposes Palestinian society to laws, institutions and a lifestyle that is mostly “Western” and does not constitute a natural continuation of the experience of this society’s traditional way of life. Secondly, Palestinian society inside Israel is influenced by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza and the diaspora: this influence is divided into the national facet with all its various hues represented by political movements and parties and the cultural facet including political Islam as a comprehensive lifestyle. Thirdly, the Arab world, especially through Arab satellite media, literature, music, other entertainment and printed media: this influence reinforces the fluency of literary Arabic, exposing the Arab world to local dialects, mentalities and different family values, processes of democratization on the one hand and Islamization on the other hand with all its various streams. Fourthly, globalization, especially its influence on youth culture and the culture dealing with hi-tech and business.

The Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner³ attempted to explain how humans live in their ecological environment, including their relations with the family, institutions serving the individual such as education, welfare, politics, media systems, laws, and cultural values and the influence of the interaction between these different factors on the individual. This broad and deep systemic perspective will help us to understand the individual Palestinian citizen of Israel living in a complex ecology composed of an entirety of the above-mentioned circles of influence acting simultaneously, sometimes in harmony and at other times creating dissonance.

Intersectionality of the influence of the state

State laws that intervene in and shape the social structure of Palestinian society

On the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel, 15% of the Palestinian population lost their state and became a minority group, citizens of a newly created state.⁴ Macro-changes were imposed upon this group, including change in geographical

² Cheney, LaFrance, and Quinteros 2006.

³ Bronfenbrenner 1979.

⁴ Pappé 2006.

domicile, especially for all the displaced internal refugees, and change in status from landowners to destitution. There was also a cultural change from belonging to a Palestinian state with a dominant Arab culture to belonging to a “Western” state with a dominant Israeli Jewish culture, from a state influenced by the Islamic religion to a state influenced by Judaism. The prevalent consideration of the Palestinian population toward the laws and culture of the young state, which were enforced upon them, was one of suspicion and hostility.⁵ Laws that influenced the Palestinian population were firstly the Compulsory Education Act (1949) that obliged all parents to ensure the regular attendance of their children in educational institutions from grade 1 through grade 8. This law was amended in 1968 with the reform of junior high schools, extending compulsory education to grade 9. In 2007, the Knesset authorized an additional extension to the end of grade 12.⁶

In 1945, the Palestinian Arab population numbered 1.2 million residents. Palestinian school students in state education in that year numbered 56,359 boys (78.6%) and 15,303 girls (21.4%). The number of Palestinian students in private education systems (Christian and Muslim) stood at 36,673, 43% of them were boys.⁷ The Compulsory Education Act altered the structure of the classic existing social stratification, abolishing the work force of children and adolescents, and allowing poor children to receive education like the wealthy, and enabling the general population of girls to receive the same education as the boys.

The second law with far-reaching effects was the Marriage Age Act (1950) that was amended in 2012, raising marriage age to 18 years and supporting the enforcement of the first act. The third law that challenged the power relations structure in the Palestinian family was the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (1991) that tested the concepts of parental control, parental authority and equal rights between spouses; in fact, it created new norms for marital and family relations.

These three laws were mostly received by Palestinian citizens with resistance and hostility was demonstrated toward the state that was accused of trying to control Palestinian society’s institutions and culture. Palestinian society also related with animosity toward the Palestinian officials and activists who acted to promote the laws and accused them of cooptation and betrayal of cultural values. This reality was characteristic throughout the period of the military regime that was imposed on the Palestinian population until 1966.⁸

5 Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005.

6 Knesset Israel, *Book of Statutes*, 2104, July 26, 2007.

7 Al-Haj 1995.

8 Podedh 2001; Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005.

Education and new elites

Financial difficulties on the one hand and the restriction of freedom of movement due to the conditions of the military regime on the other hand encouraged Palestinian families to promote the education of a tiny percentage of young people, who acquired higher education in Israel and abroad and became the new elite. These academic cadres gradually replaced the traditional leadership in the management of local governments and political, economic, educational and social institutions. In the 1970s, academics constituted a mere 0.4% of the Palestinian population. This rose to 2.2% in the 1980s and to 3% in the 1990s.⁹ There were just a few hundred Palestinian women graduates constituting a tiny percentage of the population. This reality did not enable equality between the sexes since the number of those with high school and higher education was totally unequal for men and women. This equality became possible, with even a tilt in preference of women, only in the 21st century. Thus, by 2012, the percentage of Palestinian men in the Israeli population completing 16+ years of education was 11.6% in contrast to 12.6% Palestinian women.¹⁰

The occupation of the West Bank of Jordan and the Gaza Strip by Israel, and the opening of these borders to the culture of the Arab world and its political and religious institutions led to new and varied influences on the Palestinian citizens of Israel. They were exposed to a world of educated women, employed in senior positions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as doctors, engineers, pharmacists, school principals and teachers in schools for girls. The work of these women was enabled especially, and paradoxically, through the separation of the sexes in education that operated there and in most of the states of the Arab world. Palestinians in Israel learned that their political/national reality led them to be held back in the race for progress, especially with regard to higher education for women.

In response to the Israeli policy of intensive appropriation of lands, imposed on the Palestinian population until the 1970s, the younger academic generation initiated widespread political activity that reached a peak with the establishment of the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, that gradually replaced the rule of the *mukhtars* (village heads) in Palestinian society. Due to the Front's declared egalitarian ideology, women were invited to take part in these new institutions, although they were not promised an equal part in the administration and leadership. The process was very slowly reversed: although women staffed the operative mechanisms, the young male academic leadership cadre cooperated with the family and *hamulla* (extended family) leaders, promising their support, so that a young, all-

⁹ Al-Haj 1995.

¹⁰ CBS 2014, Table 8.72, population aged 15 and over, by population group, years of schooling, age and sex.

male, leadership began to manage the organizations' management of the new social and political movements and the leadership of local governments. Thus young male Palestinian reformist academics contributed to the reconstruction of the political, social and cultural influence of the traditional leadership and excluded women from the leadership, sufficing with their representation in a declarative and symbolic manner.¹¹

The 1980s were characterized by growth of Palestinization on the one hand and Islamization on the other hand.¹² Discussion ensued concerning the issue of social and political gender equality. Palestinian movements and parties appeared that challenged state policies, advocating full equality and democratization; gender equality was mentioned as one of the important issues; however none of these parties or movements placed a woman at their head. The cadres in the front lines of these bodies claimed: (a) the national (external) struggle is preferred over the (internal) struggle for gender equality; (b) Palestinian women are not assertive, they do not fight to be included in the front lines and so they are not worthy to lead the society at this historical stage.¹³ The first argument is a classic argument in all similar situations in the Arab world.¹⁴ And the second argument is the classic argument in the dynamics of relations between oppressors and the oppressed.¹⁵

The influence of non-governmental organizations

The connection of Palestinian citizens of Israel with other Palestinians in the Arab world and in other countries, together with the influence of globalization processes, especially those stemming from Europe and the USA, has provided support for the establishment of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Most of these organizations have relied either overtly or covertly on democratic principles and equality between groups including gender equality. A few of the organizations have declared that they are feminist, even receiving feminist training and their publications use feminist terminology.¹⁶ Both men and women work in the NGOs, however most of the funding bodies conditioned continuation of funding on the employment of women and with time women have been appointed to manage most of these organizations, but not only women. Several organizations opened simultaneously in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The cadres employed in these organizations received joint training and guidance and collaborated to form joint programs and

¹¹ Abu-Baker 1998.

¹² Smootha 2001.

¹³ Abu-Baker 1998.

¹⁴ Badran 1996.

¹⁵ Freire 1970.

¹⁶ Abu Alasal 2006.

projects (for example: “The Feminist Research and Training Project for Palestinian Women” that included Palestinian women from East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon).

Women’s organizations provided most of the education services for early childhood, education and vocational training for illiterate women and welfare services for children and women in distress in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Most of these organizations were managed by women who became knowledgeable experts and became a part of an international professional network.

During this period, the influence of the Islamic Movement began to be reflected in the Palestinian population in Israel. It was fed especially by the influence of the Islamic Movement in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Arab states and Islamic states.¹⁷ Signs of Islamization began to appear in the Palestinian street in Israel in the dress code of women and men, supporting local and imported production of Islamic clothing, ritual products, religious tourism to Mecca, a flow of local and Islamic NGO resources for the establishment of mosques and an alternative Islamic education system, especially for early childhood. Men managed the Islamic Movement and its financial bodies, while women organized associations that relied on the ideologies of different streams of the Islamic Movement.¹⁸ Women worked as teachers in Islamic kindergartens, as instructors in the summer camps and in the systems for financial and welfare assistance. In 2010, it was noted that there were about 100 unrecognized kindergartens belonging to the Islamic Movement in Northern Israel.¹⁹ Women leaders in these settings were subordinate to the official leadership of the Islamic Movement and disseminated its ideology. Thus, they fulfilled their role while maintaining the existing status of gender equality in the family and society in accordance with the principles of the Islamic Movement.

The Islamic Movement re-educated broad sectors of Palestinian society in Israel to return to the bosom of their religion and to adopt a traditional religious lifestyle. Nevertheless, the movement’s institutions encouraged and supported both men and women to complete their academic education in Israel and abroad under the condition that they observe religious principles. The Islamic Movement intelligently employed modern tools, including men and women in public spheres, and promising to maintain traditional principles in the private sphere. Thus, it reinforced the status of the patriarch represented by the figures of religious leaders, fathers and husbands. A group of feminist religious women adopted Islamic feminism, which suffices with the realization of Muslim women’s rights that were promised in the Koran

¹⁷ Smootha 2001.

¹⁸ Abu Alasal 2006.

¹⁹ Knesset Israel, “Protocol 243, Meeting of Education Committee.” June 29, 2010, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.knesset.gov.il/protocols/data/html/chinuch/2010-06-29-02.html>.

and *Sunnah* (the Prophet's oral prescriptions). These religious feminist women cooperated with similar organizations and with leaders in the Arab world.²⁰

In the 1990s, with the return of Palestinian leadership to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the status of feminist women leaders deteriorated. Until then, most of them stood at the head of NGOs, they received their organizations' funds from Palestinian and other bodies located in the West and enjoyed instruction and cooperation within a wide-branched international professional network.

A classical conflict regarding the management of institutions and organizations ensued between the existing women leaders and men in the political leadership, who had returned from Tunisia; this conflict was conducted with the old-new weapons, besmirching the women's personal and political reputation. Women's NGOs, funded by Western organizations were accused of serving colonialists and trying to break up Palestinian family and social structure by persuading Palestinian women to adopt the argument of equality between the sexes, which, in the critics' opinion, was foreign to traditional Palestinian society and in contradiction to several principles of the Islamic religion. These accusations seriously harmed the demands of Palestinian women for complete equality, equality resembling the definitions of the classical feminist movement. The direct accusation equated feminism with colonialism; Palestinian women, proud of their feminist heritage in the field, became targets for social and political attacks. This trend also existed in the Arab world,²¹ and filtered through into Palestinian society in Israel.

Intersectionality of internal factors in relation to gender in the Palestinian family and civilian society in Israel

The education boom and neo-patriarchy

Contrastingly, in the 1950s, the dawn of the establishment of the State of Israel, there was a change in the structure of the Palestinian family.²² The diminishment of the population due to expulsions beyond the borders of the state on the one hand²³ and massive expropriation of lands on the other hand had a direct influence on the transition of the Palestinian population from agrarian labor and lifestyle to proletarian labor and lifestyle.²⁴ The disappearance of the lands as private property and the

²⁰ Abu Alasal 2006.

²¹ Jebreel 2012; Samara 2006.

²² Al-Haj 1987; Abu-Baker 2012.

²³ Pappé 2006.

²⁴ Haidar 2005; Rosenfeld 1980.

reduction of revenues from agriculture in the remaining fields brought an end to the need for cheap labor in agriculture. Gradually, all the children in the family, boys and girls, registered for schools in their villages and towns. Except for a few schools belonging to church orders, the entire education system was coeducational for both genders. Localities where there were high schools, registered a higher proportion of girls who graduated from high school.²⁵ Privileged families and parents with a modern social outlook encouraged their daughters to acquire higher education, especially teaching studies. The diminishment of professional academics in the remnants of Palestinian society that remained in Israel, as a direct result of *Al-Nakba*, led the new state to encourage new teachers to take up employment immediately after high school or studies in a teacher's seminar. The first generation of Palestinian government employees were teachers, who worked in their home towns or villages although some worked as peripatetic teachers in several localities where there were no graduates.²⁶ The establishment of a teachers' seminar in Haifa (later the Arab College, Haifa), as a boarding college, encouraged traditional parents to send their daughters to study teaching. In addition to studying teaching, boys also studied other free professions in Israeli universities and the Technion. Some, assisted by funds from the Communist Party, even went to study higher education in Communist states of Europe, and later funded by their nuclear and extended families, they were able to study in all European countries and North America. By the end of the 1970s, all the above-mentioned institutions included Palestinian students on their campuses.

The patriarch enjoyed the modernity of Palestinian women: fathers envisaging the economic potential in higher education allowed their daughters to further their studies. Some families forbade their daughters to study far from home, since this necessitated sleeping outside the home, far from patriarchal supervision. Thus the father, directly or indirectly, determined the choice of discipline to be studied and consequently his daughter's vocation. Young women who arrived in the higher education institutions immediately after high school, without a profession, and with slim chances of receiving a grant (since they had not served in the Israeli army), were forced to rely on funding for their studies from their parents, usually the father. Parents conditioned their financial support on supervision of the women students' behavior, demanding that they maintain traditional values and sustain the family's good reputation. Practices enforced to maintain family traditions shaped the subjects studied in higher education, one of the levers of modernity, without allowing the women to choose the disciplines. Thus, although they studied in multi-cultural institutions of higher education, the women were not able to enjoy a true inter-cultural experience in its broad sense due to restrictive paternal conditions.

²⁵ Abu-Rabia-Queder 2004, 2012.

²⁶ Abu-Baker 1998.

An additional group of families, under the influence of norms that developed in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, were willing to fund their daughter's higher education studies on the condition that she promised to give her future income for at least three years to her father, a sort of compensation for the expenses invested in her studies. This practice was especially important for poor families, since it allowed additional brothers and sisters in their turn to acquire higher education. The women continued to reimburse their fathers, even after their marriage, until the end of the predetermined period. This arrangement meant that the women did not become financially independent. At the same time, the father and later her husband and family maintained their financial investment and even increased their financial revenues from it, in addition to the profit of improving their social reputation.

The acceptance of Palestinian women graduates from an accredited academic higher education institution in Israel or Europe did not change the Palestinian family structure or the nature of marital relationships or the traditional division of roles and authority in the family. Consequently, it did not alter women's status in the family and in Palestinian society. Where there were changes, they were specific, conditioned by various factors.²⁷ However, where there was an intersection of several factors, such as economic, political and national status, the traditional situation continued to exist, with modern decor. Sometimes, a spark of feminist discourse engendered re-examination of the socialization processes, education and distribution of resources within the family and society, and discussion concerning women's participation in political power.²⁸ The patriarchs neutralized this budding discourse, strongly criticizing its content and diverting the discourse so that the women who instigated it were accused, as already noted, of betraying their tradition and acting as agents for foreign colonial culture, threatening to undermine proper family and social order and insulting local patriarchal leadership. Traditional women also participated in the attack, influenced by the values of patriarchal education, which saw the feminists' suggestions for a new division of functions and gender equality as a serious injury to morale, and to the tradition and values of Islam.

Both in the private and public spheres, Palestinian men refused to alter the traditional distribution of functions and held on to the status quo. Without any immediate response, and faced by men's refusal to enlist to their assistance, Palestinian women who entered the labor market in the public sphere relied on the help of other women in order to continue to fulfill their traditional roles, such as child care and administering the household.²⁹ Help was given by mothers, sisters, mothers-in-law and other female members of the family and even by women outside the family for payment. In most cases, when relatives enlisted to help poor working women,

²⁷ Haj Yehia Abu-Ahmad 2006; Abu-Baker 2010; Erdreich 2010.

²⁸ Abu-Baker 2001, 2007a; Sa'ar 2012.

²⁹ Jaraisse 1991; Haj-Yahia 1995.

the situation limited possibilities for economic, political and social progress of all the women involved, those who worked and those who supported them by fulfilling their traditional roles. With regard to a sense of welfare, the multiplicity of the women's roles and the often conflicting expectations from them, for example to invest more time in looking after the family yet also to bring more income into the family, often harmed their sense of psycho-social wellbeing.³⁰

This same reality actually reinforced neo-patriarchy³¹ and improved men's status; they married educated women, who were more independent, and their income increased, also increasing their living standard. Children received better supervision and education, enabling the patriarch to continue to expand their investment in their work, in their hamulla, social and political relations. Fathers and brothers enhanced their social pride and reputation especially when their daughters with academic education and employed in positions that promised a permanent income, were married to "busy" men.

Economy, gender, and maintenance of the family structure

Three deficiencies in areas of state responsibility influence the circumstances of Palestinian women's employment in Israel. Firstly, Arab villages and towns in Israel suffer from a lack of industrial areas in their close vicinity. This severely limits the opportunities and character of work available in these localities, especially for women;³² secondly, a lack of public transportation in Arab villages and between Arab localities;³³ and thirdly, a lack of services including educational and welfare centers for mother and child, at reasonable prices, that could help the woman to be more available for financially profitable work outside the home.³⁴ In addition to the registered number of Palestinian women employed in regular work who constitute 22% of all Palestinian women of working age,³⁵ there are unrecorded numbers of Palestinian women, especially in rural localities, who are employed in family businesses or temporary employment, such as harvesting crops with family members or through their agency.³⁶ These occupations are founded on the exploitation of Palestinian women as cheap labor.³⁷ Women agree to work under difficult conditions and almost without any significant financial remuneration and thus cooperate with and

³⁰ Abu-Baker 2007b, 2008.

³¹ Sharabi 1999.

³² Haidar 2005; Khattab 2009.

³³ Malchi 2013.

³⁴ Almagor-Luten 2009.

³⁵ CBS 2013.

³⁶ Haidar 2005.

³⁷ Alsheikh et al. 2012.

reinforce the economic and social status of the patriarchy, contributing to the continuity of the patriarchal structure that oppresses and discriminates against them.³⁸ The contextual reasons for this are: Firstly, in comparison to the reality of working for nothing, when women, either single or married, continuously contribute to the home and family economy, even raising the children of relatives without any financial compensation, any tiny income is appreciated by this group of women as significant income. Secondly, most of the women in this group are not mobile; they live their daily lives under patriarchal supervision and need permission or accompaniment by someone on behalf of the patriarch if mobile. In Druze society for example, in order to ensure the continuation of their tradition, religious leaders have issued an edict that prevents a woman driving license owner and her parents from entering the *khilwah* (Druze prayer house). In other words, they threatened to impose religious excommunication on the family, a very meaningful far-reaching sanction in traditional society.³⁹ The edict does not apply to Druze males with a driving license. This is a classical example of the use of traditional means, such as religion in order to prevent signs of modernity, such as a woman driving that would enhance her mobility and independence.

Working outside the home, even under conditions resembling slavery, allows a certain distancing from the extended family and the woman can create new and refreshing relationships, enjoying a momentary sense, however false, of independence and dominion. Their working conditions strengthen the employer, but they never ensure financial independence for their Palestinian women workers or income equal to that of the Palestinian men (or Israeli Jewish workers). Thus, their status within their families as breadwinners remains inferior and unvalued. In encounters at home between a couple, the husband will act as the one who is returning from hard work and will demand relaxing treats from his wife at home. However, the woman cannot demand this consideration from the man, and will act as a homemaker that enlists to manage her traditional roles successfully.⁴⁰

Marriage, building a family, and economic power

Heterosexual, monogamist, endogamous marriage within the same religious group and patriarchal domicile are predominant characteristics of marriage in Palestinian society. Women move to live in their husband's locality. Lack of suitable lands for house construction in Arab villages and towns have increased the price of the few private lands still available as reserves for building for the younger generation. On

38 Abu-Baker 2003.

39 Weiner-Levi 2011.

40 Abu-Baker 2003.

the other hand, the presence of several male brothers needing housing, with an average difference in age of approximately two years between them, means that the project of house building for children is of primary importance for Palestinian families. A further consideration is that the low income of Palestinian citizens in comparison to other citizens of the Israeli state means that being able to own a home is a challenge to Palestinian society in general.

The intersection between the expropriation of lands, poverty and lack of equal conditions for the Palestinian population to purchase a home in Jewish towns and villages, together with patriarchal practices and discriminatory inheritance laws have encouraged the continuation of the patriarchal mechanism. Parents, who take responsibility for their male children, begin to build housing units for them close to their own homes, immediately when this becomes financially possible. It is usually cheaper to build several housing units simultaneously over several years. This practice has meant that sons continue to live close to their parents and prevents a process of migration to the larger towns. Thus too, parents of a bridegroom determine the bride's future place of residence and determine how she assimilates within the life of the husband's nuclear and extended family of origin.⁴¹

This fact has led to a norm that the investment in male children is a fixed long-term investment, while the investment in female children is a moveable and transitory investment. Families avoid bequeathing their property to their daughters and thus a continuous gap is formed between the values of private property held by women and by men when they marry. In several areas in the Triangle region and the Galilee, it is accepted practice that the family of the groom provides a home – solid immovable property and investment – and the family of the bride provides the furniture – disposable moveable property that loses its value by time. Although women invest from their income in the construction of their home and sometimes in the construction of a home for their husband's brothers, in order to prevent them from attaining future rights on these houses, the grandparents register the property in their names without dividing rights in the property among their male children and grandchildren. For reasons justified as etiquette, customs prevent women from conditioning their residence in the husband's locality on the registration of the family home jointly in their name and in the husband's name. Women who insist on this are accused of attempting to break up the property of the joint family of origin.

In order to shatter the reality that excludes and restricts the woman, she or her husband needs to enjoy a high enough income to enable them to purchase new private land or a private house in the same locality or one of the towns. This solution implies the weakening of inter-generational connections, a diminished sense of affiliation to the extended family and the hamulla, weakening the patriarch's role and encouraging equality of opportunity for men and women. However, this solution is

41 Omari-Haider 2010.

unavailable for most young couples due to economic limitations and they remain under the dominion of the patriarch.

Conditions of marital relations that create gender gaps

The children of the first Palestinian women academics in the State of Israel did not lead a more equally shared life in terms of gender in comparison with children of women who were not educated.⁴² When they chose to marry, the principles of gender equality were not central conditions in their choice of a spouse.⁴³ Feminist discourse had not filtered into the Palestinian family in Israel and remained within the domain of women's organizations and field activities.⁴⁴

Women did not succeed in exploiting their education as human capital within the nuclear family and the extended family or within their society.⁴⁵ Patriarchal power bypassed their qualifications by maintaining traditional values, such as the retention of the custom of men marrying "down," especially maintaining a gap in ages to the benefit of the groom. This custom entails men marrying women younger than them, less educated, sometimes even before they have completed their school studies and become financially independent. Thus, marital relations are shaped in light of a complex of advantages for the man and are maintained for years, even when the woman reduces gaps between her education and income and that of her husband.

The fact that many women decide to further their academic education has led to a rise in the age of marriage. Because of the gap in ages allowed between the spouses, single women graduates aged 24 find themselves competing with a large group of women aged 17–24, so that men continuously prefer to marry younger women, when they search for a spouse. These men do not give preference to women's education, rather to younger age and earning ability.⁴⁶ This trend strikingly points up the lack of awareness and acceptance of gender equality, even among educated Palestinian men. Thus, the number of Palestinian spinsters has increased, including both academic and non-academic women. This relatively new trend has encouraged some Palestinian women, for the first time, to marry "down." Palestinian society disparages single women, calling them *a'wanis* ('old spinsters') and considering them socially or mentally deviant.⁴⁷

⁴² Abu-Baker 1998.

⁴³ Karkabi-Sabah 2014.

⁴⁴ Abu-Baker 2007a.

⁴⁵ Khattab 2009.

⁴⁶ Karkabi-Sabah 2014.

⁴⁷ Halihal 2008.

As the number of women academics has risen, the age of marriage has also risen for both sexes in all three sectors of Palestinian society: Islamic, Christian and Druze.⁴⁸ This increase has not brought any change in preference toward marriage of persons of the same age. The family/society maintains the age gap between the groom and bride to the benefit of the groom usually maintaining a gap of 4.4–5.5 years between them.⁴⁹ This fact has generated new individual and family practices: Firstly, in 1987 the median age of Muslim men at first marriage was 24.0 and of women 20.1; in 2007 the median age for marriage for Muslim men was 26.0 and for women 20.7. In other words, the age gap between bride and groom rose from 3.9 years in 1987 to 5.3 years in 2007.⁵⁰ This fact indicates a step backwards toward tradition and inequality. Secondly, despite the increase in the proportion of academic women, the proportion of men who chose to wed women with academic education less than their own actually increased.

The number of single women rose; the percentile of women who married husbands with a lower level of education than their own also rose.⁵¹

Modernity leads to a return to tradition

Until the 1990s, Palestinian society's social norms encouraged women to marry "up" in terms of age, education and financial resources and income. Women who chose to invest in education and acquired one or more academic degrees, experienced social and financial independence during their studies; yet they did not succeed in translating their academic success into the choice of a spouse with equal qualifications.⁵² The norm of an age gap and education gap allows men a very broad range of choice in relation to the women's range of choice. Thus, a man aged 30 would be eligible to choose a woman from all age categories from age 17–30, while women aged 30 would be limited to a choice of men aged 30 or more.⁵³ At the age of 30, most men are already married and have established families. Those who have not yet married by age 30 prefer younger women. Single women aged 30 find themselves having to choose between socially derided spinsterhood, and marrying "down," in other words with men of lower social or education level than them. The increase in the number of Palestinian single women⁵⁴ and in the number of women

⁴⁸ CBS 2013.

⁴⁹ Abu-Baker 2010.

⁵⁰ CBS, "Details of Marriages and Divorces in Israel."

⁵¹ Karkabi-Sabah 2014.

⁵² Halihal 2008.

⁵³ Karkabi-Sabah 2014.

⁵⁴ Halihal 2008.

marrying “down”⁵⁵ indicates the failure of academic and/or careerist women to translate their success into the realization of gender equality between spouses within the family. Examples of this kind meant that parents who stopped encouraging their daughters to marry at an early age in the 1970s, began again in the 1990s to entreat them to adopt the traditional values that they had abandoned for modern values. Thus, they again began to encourage their daughters to marry at an early age, now combining the establishment of a family with studies and work, as noted above.⁵⁶ This example provides further evidence of the success of the traditional mentality and approach over processes of change and modernization.

Fertility

In addition to women’s increased participation in the labor market, the increase in the number of men and women studying higher education influenced a decrease in fertility rates of Palestinian women from all three religions in a comparison between the 1980s and today.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, parents’ attitudes and desires continue to influence a young couple’s decision-making processes concerning the timing of bringing children into the world. Thus, most young couples do not use contraceptives before the birth of a second or third son or daughter.⁵⁸ This means that in most young families, their children are born within the first five years of marriage. Successive births taking place at the beginning of their marriage prevent the women, some of whom marry before beginning further education, from having the time and ability to study. Some of them even begin to work and combine their marital process, pregnancies and establishment of the family with academic studies and work. In practice, young Palestinian women compress all the most important developmental stages of their lives into these five years. The emotional and physical burdens that they endure lead to rapid burnout and chronic exhaustion, so that they suffice with the completion of tasks required for each role, forfeiting ambition and any sense of self-realization.⁵⁹ During this period, as noted, other women help these women to advance their various careers as professional women, mothers and homemakers, while the husband is usually free to establish himself professionally, socially and politically. In this personal-family-social reality, women avoid advancement in any of the areas that they have taken upon themselves; they are afraid to continue their higher education since it may harm their functioning in other areas of responsibility, burdened

55 Karkabi-Sabah 2014.

56 Abu-Baker 2012.

57 CBS 2013.

58 Abu-Baker 2015.

59 Idem 2003, 2007a.

by guilt feelings toward their young children, feeling that they cannot invest the necessary hours in childcare. This group of women avoids seeking promotion to senior roles such as coordinators or managers and they delay coping with this issue until their obligations to their young children lessen. In the mental and social domains, they have no free time to develop relationships with members of their extended family and the surrounding society. The women's steps are supervised and any decision that reflects a preference for one domain over another will be criticized by their family, their husband's family of origin, the extended family and surrounding community. Criticism directed toward them acts to maintain the woman's sole responsibility for her multiplicity of roles and the women's sense of a lack of well-being.⁶⁰ In contrast, men allow themselves to expend time and energy in one or two domains that they choose, such as work and social activity, or political activity and leisure time. The families of origin (the wife's and her husband's), the extended family and surrounding community will support these choices and even justify them. In a broader systemic way, as noted, this "norm" does not only influence the advancement of the female public with their multiple careers, but also leads to the stagnation of the situation for all women and all men in general. High prices have been paid by the minority of women who chose not to follow the herd, rather to make their own chosen preferences such as building a career, neglecting the matter of fertility or motherhood and even standing for election in opposition to men in political life.⁶¹

Participation in politics

The dispute concerning the equality of Palestinian women as candidates for election in local and national politics has resounded since the beginning of the 1990s.⁶² Over the years, pro-active associations and affirmative action projects have been established such as the "National Project for Arab Women's Representation in Local Government" under the auspices of a coalition of women's organizations and the "Women's Equal Representation" project, aimed mainly at encouraging equal opportunities for women.

In 2003, 249 Palestinian women candidates stood for election in local government but only two were elected. In 2008, 149 women stood for election in local governments, only six were elected.⁶³ In 1987, one – and the only – woman was elected as mayor. In 1999, Hussniya Jabara was elected as the first Palestinian woman to become a member of the 15th session of the Israeli Knesset on behalf of the Meretz

⁶⁰ Idem 2003, 2007a.

⁶¹ Idem 1998.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Khouri 2013; Bender, 2013; Shaa'lan 2013.

Party. After her election, Nadia Hilou was elected on behalf of the Labor party to the 17th Knesset, and most recently, Haneen Zoabi was elected on behalf of the Balad party to the 18th, 19th and the 20th sessions of the Knesset. She was also the first Palestinian woman to be elected on behalf of a Palestinian party. In 2015 Aida Touma-Suleiman was elected for the 20th sessions of the Knesset on behalf of the Communist Party and the Front Movement for Democracy and Peace. The election of these women was preceded by successive elections of Palestinian men who stood for Zionist parties and parties defined as left-wing Zionist. Palestinian society through Palestinian media, Palestinian women's organizations and Palestinian parties attacked the women, who were elected to the Knesset, and described them as collaborators, Zionists, traitors, and serving the oppressors of the Palestinian nation.⁶⁴ Palestinian men elected by the public in the same frameworks did not suffer this censure. The attacks by Palestinian society against the elected women from Zionist parties on the one hand and the attacks from Jewish society against Member of Knesset Haneen Zoabi, who was elected from a Palestinian national party on the other hand, created a delegitimization of the role, status and contribution of Palestinian women elected to the Israeli Knesset. Here too, the immense investment that led to the election of women to this high-ranking political position was not exploited as a lever for the alteration of Palestinian women's status.

The example of Palestinian women members of the Knesset demonstrates the dynamics of cooperation in which there is intersectionality between state factors and factors of Palestinian society. When factors in the state, such as Zionist parties chose a Palestinian woman for the Knesset, factors in Palestinian society blocked the progress of this trend by marking the woman as the enemy of Palestinian society, because this trend threatened to undermine the status of Palestinian men at the head of the political pyramid. In contrast, and similarly, when social factors such as the Palestinian parties chose a Palestinian woman for the Knesset, other factors in the state blocked the acceleration of this trend by marking the woman as the enemy of the state. A research study that examined the mechanism of corrective discrimination as a solution for the elevation of Palestinian women in politics in Israel found that Palestinian women supported such a process but Palestinian men objected to it.⁶⁵ Thus, it seems as though there is no practical solution that would allow Palestinian women to participate in political activity as equals to Palestinian men, while continuing to be accepted by both the state and Palestinian society.

⁶⁴ Abu-Oksa Daoud 2005; Hamid 2005.

⁶⁵ Nohad and Gordoni 2009.

Summary

The society of Palestinian citizens of Israel is characterized by both traditionalism and modernity, conservatism and change, processes that are experienced simultaneously in their daily lives, and in the main, in harmony. The gender discrimination that exists in traditional societies is obvious and becomes more acute due to intersectionality with national discrimination that prevents the general Palestinian minority society from realizing complete equality in economic, political and education resources with the majority Israeli Jewish society. In the reality of discrimination and systemic and institutional oppression that the state imposes through official overt and indirect tools at its disposal against Palestinian society, a situation is created in which the oppressed society institutionalizes gender discrimination and channels existing resources for the benefit of men, who are considered as having the potential to retain the resources and power. Palestinian society has developed mechanisms, most based on Palestinian traditions or religious rules, in order to impede the changes and achievements attained by Palestinian women, to ensure the continuation of male domination in the society and to reinforce it. Intersectionality of discriminatory laws, poverty and lack of equal conditions for Palestinian society, together with patriarchal customs and discriminatory inheritance laws encourage the continuation of the patriarchal mechanism and reinforce existing gender regulation.

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