



Research Paper

# Israeli's Education System and Arab Women: A Feminist Perspective

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## Abstract

The Arab women in Israel face challenges from three aspects- Race, Religion and Gender. This paper examines the characteristics of Israeli's education system and position of Arab women in it. The participation rates of Israeli Arab women are low relative to those of Israeli Jewish women and to women in western countries. The study characterizes the key determinants of the patterns of participation of Arab women. The question of distributive justice has become one of the most important means of struggle for equality and social justice. The present study tries to analyse the reality of Arab women in Israel in the area of education compared to their Jewish counterpart. The study will cover two broad areas like 'mainstreaming gender and question of minority'. The study at large focuses on understanding the political and economic system's effects on education among Arab women in Israel. The primary intention of the study is to convince the policy makers to take into account the aspects of gender and ethnicity. This will advance social justice and equality between men and women in general, and between Arab women and Israel women in particular. The paper presents the general status of Arab women in Israel over the past decades. It studies the mechanisms for reducing their poverty and assimilating them in the economic growth and development by enhancing their human capital (level of education).

Israel's Arab population currently constitutes twenty per cent of the overall Israeli population (numbering 2 million citizens) and includes Muslim and Christian Palestinian-Arabs, Bedouin and Druze communities. The poverty rate among Arab families and Arab women is directly linked to the level of participation in education, the nature of the employment, and the economic sectors and occupations in which Arab women generally work. Change in Arab women's economic status and reduction of poverty requires improvement in their human capital (upgrading their education and areas of specialization). The Middle East peace process, which has led to improved relations between Israel and its neighbours, has also led to a new attempt to bridge the gap between the Arab and Jewish sectors within Israel. Arabs have not been a part of the planning of the Jewish state and have remained at the margins, living more traditional lives. They have a higher rate of unemployment and illiteracy. Arab women in Israel education system receive inferior allocations for training, supervision, nature, and art lessons.

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## I. Introduction

The right to education for the most marginalized Arab women and girls is violated by the overall policy of the State. Arab Bedouin women of the Naqab are the most marginalized and excluded among the Arab Palestinian women citizens of Israel. Furthermore, almost half of the women in Naqab are living in villages unrecognized as such by the State; consequently they are excluded from development policies including that of education. Furthermore, such policy promotes exit of Arab Palestinian girls citizens of Israel from the formal educational system because of lack of logistical access and prohibits entry to institutions of higher education because of lack of financial access. Arab Palestinian women citizens of Israel are lacking access to equal education or to development opportunities, despite Israel's law for Free Compulsory Education to all enacted in 1947, and the Women's Equal Rights law from 1951 which is not implemented in education; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of Dec. 1948, article 26 stating free compulsory fundamental education shall be available to everyone, and shall be directed to the full development of the human personality.

### **Effects of Nationalism, Feminism and Colonialism on Arab women in Israel**

These three elements are seen as interconnected in Arab world, as in many developing countries. However, even though early Arab feminist consciousness developed in hand in hand with national consciousness, feminism is a product of Arabic political and socioeconomic dynamics. The turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century, that marks the beginning of the Arab renaissance. On the other hand, opponents argue that the feminism was alien to Arab world and that was imported during the Western intervention in the Middle East. Somehow this improves the consciousness level in the Arab women in Israel. Israeli Arab women's face multiple handicaps: They are non-Jews in a society designed specifically for Jews; their status in the social class structure is for the most part low. Their degree of westernization is insufficient to adapt to the society of the majority which was transplanted from Europe, and furthermore they are often considered a security risk. Looking for the sources of inequality in education, and trying to design a plan for change, some feminists employed questions and methods to explain and combat inequality. various nuances, implications, sources, and, hence, also the various questions asked in the attempt to understand inequality from feminist approaches that propose different and diverse ways of analyzing sources of inequality and ways to effect social change.

Employing questions and methods used by various waves of feminists to explain and combat inequality between men and women, the author asks, how could the education system benefit from equal representation of the voice of Arab leadership? Borrowing from feminist discourse that raises the importance of the diversity of voices and multiculturalism, the author explores and proposes ways of respecting and reinforcing diverse cultural and national identities in the Israeli education system. Israel has a vibrant and diverse feminist arena, comprising dozens of organizations that provide vital services and advocate for gender equality. Organisations like- Achoti, Adva Center, Alma (Hebrew Facebook page), Alumot, Assiwar-Feminist Arab Movement, The Association of Rape Crisis Centres in Israel (ARCCI), ASWAT- Palestinian Gay Women, AWC- Arab Women in the Center, Centre for Women's Justice, The Department of Gender Equality and Promoting Women, Economic Empowerment for Women, Movement of Democratic Women in Israel, Women Against Violence these organisations are functioning with the goal of advancing the status and rights of Arab women in Israel.

The leaders of Arab women associations in Israel are defined today as Arab or Palestinian women citizens of Israel. The female gender is thus interlinked with their ethnic belonging. They refuse to distinguish the two identities and claim to carry out two fights simultaneously: one at the sides of the men of their community against the injustices created and maintained by the Israeli State in its Jewishness, the other against the patriarchy of the Israeli society as a whole and the Arab community in particular. In this sense, feminism is related to the Palestinian fight.

Today Arab feminists are confronted with a major challenge, that of a redefinition of their fight. Arab feminists who seek to become autonomous do so in comparison with feminism, considered to be too radical, which they often liken to western or Jewish feminism in Israel. These criticisms are also made by non-feminists who do not feel concerned by the feminist movement such as it is led by certain Jewish or Arab women and who claim a definition specific to the interests of Arab women citizens. They are particularly critical towards some Arab feminists, whom they consider as completely enslaved by the Jewish and Western model and too radical to be representative of the expectations of their community. They accuse them of having left aside the fight in favour of the Palestinians. Their agendas do not appear realistic to them. Zuheira Sabbagh, feminist militant in Jabha declared: "I am in favour of a feminist education of women but I refuse to copy American or Israeli feminism".

### **Questioning Inequality-First Wave**

First-generation feminists searched for egalitarian social relations and ways to change unequal social conditions through the search for equal citizenship. They believed that if institutions of the state (electoral politics, higher education, etc.) were opened to women, women would become equal citizens. From Olive Schreiner to Simone de Beauvoir, first-generation feminists were preoccupied with the issue of women's material differences from men. In her book, *Woman and Labour*, Schreiner (1911) argued that women are candidature for the political sphere depends on not only access to that sphere but also an alteration in the meaning of public and private. Virginia Woolf (1929), as well as other first-wave feminists, argued that women need financial independence.

Arab education receives inferior allocations for training, supervision, nature, and art lessons. In general, the physical infrastructure of the schools is more dilapidated. The educational situation of the children in the unofficial Bedouin villages is extremely dire. Many students are forced to walk kilometres to the nearest bus stop and then travel large distances (up to 70 km) to reach their schools. The physical conditions in the schools are bad and they lack basic study aids. The Arab schools have significantly fewer of the unique programs in which the Ministry of Education invests.

For example, the money invested in an Arab student who falls under the category of “extra need for nurturing” is on average only one fifth of the amount invested for Jewish children and, thus, through our efforts, the Ministry changed its measurement and budgeting methods of its “nurturing budgets” (Kahn & Yelinek, 2000). The unequal distribution of support funds that the Ministry of Education gives to associations and nongovernment organizations acting outside the education system is especially interesting. In 1999, the Ministry of Education gave NIS 1,309,588,679 (approximately US\$350 million) to associations, less than 1.5% of which went to Arab associations.

### **Questioning Inequality-Second Wave**

First-wave feminism won legal and public emancipation for women, the vote, and welfare rights for women. But women did not gain full equality. Thus, although first-wave feminists pressed hard against the notion of separate spheres, arguing that inequalities between the sexes were socially divisive, second-wave feminists, while agreeing that sexual differences shaped the sexual division of labour, nonetheless argued that women’s needs and rights were not identical to those of men. They claimed that inequalities between the sexes could not be overcome by allowing women into male-run society but rather, by changing the society to include the needs and interests of women.

Second-generation feminists started focusing on the specifications of women’s differences from men; they focused on the conditions of women’s everyday difference from men in the street and at home (Humm, 1992). The second wave challenged the traditional understanding of politics by expanding the discussion to all women in society and arguing that “the personal is political.” Introducing the term *sexual politics*, Kate Millet (1997) asked, “Can the relationship between the sexes be viewed in a political light at all?” Arabs are not partners in the Ministry of Education’s decision-making system, in the outlining of policy, or in planning. There is no Arab district manager, no Arab administration head, and no Arab representation in the Ministry’s management. Of the Thousands of people who work in the Ministry’s administrative headquarters, not even 10 are Arab, and most of them work in the cafeteria. The education system that purports to teach our children democracy, human rights, and active citizenship does not apply these values itself.

The fear of the Arab voice is so great that even today; every appointment of an Arab teacher requires the approval of the General Security Service via the deputy supervisor of Arab Education. This situation creates fear and lack of trust in the Arab teachers and principals and increases the sense among the Arab public that the education system discriminates against it and neglects it. The fact that Arabs have no representation in the Ministry of Education reflects their absent presence in the lives of most Jews in Israel and especially in the lives of most of the decision makers. The inequity in budgets, curriculum development, and subject materials that respect the culture and identity of Arabs are the problem of not only the Arabs in Israel but also Israeli society as a whole. There can be no education without empowerment, and this situation in which Jews make decisions, plan, and develop curricula is one that represses not only the Arab minority but also the Jewish majority. Many Arab educators like Dr. Khaled Abu Assba (2004) claimed that Equal representation of Arabs in planning and management will be possible only if an autonomous Arab administration is established.

### **Questioning Inequality-Third Wave**

The third wave feminists claim that the text books in Israel respected their history and culture but not those of the Arab minority. Second-wave feminism turned to psychoanalytic as well as to social theories about gender differences to create new feminist ethics (Cixous, 1993). What remains constant throughout all waves of feminism is the idea that women are unequal to men because men create the meaning of equality. But the third wave of feminists criticized “the false universalism” in feminist theory, arguing that there is more than one women’s voice, articulating the historical and cultural differences of race and class (Davis, 1981; Smith, 1984). In the third generation of feminism, women raised the importance of the diversity of voices and multiculturalism. To the prevailing second-generation notion, according to which women have a different voice, were now added questions of diversity and multiplicity among women. Black feminists in the United States claimed that their struggle for equality was not necessarily like the struggle of middle-class and upper-class White women’s struggle for equality (Damari-Madar, 2002; hooks, 1991). In Israel, these voices belonged to Mizrahi and Palestinian women, women who emphasized that their socioeconomic status and cultural origin influenced their perceptions and their voices and that the creation of an egalitarian and just society would be possible only if the variety of voices and cultures were given room within it. Borrowing from the feminist discussion, we considered, studied, and proposed ways of respecting and reinforcing the different identities in the Israeli education system.

### **Disadvantaged Women in Israel**

In 2010, there were 3.85 million women in Israel. Of these, there were 778,000 Arab-Israeli women, 60,000 Ethiopian-Israeli women, and 250,000 Haredi women (estimated). Since its independence in 1948, Israel has instituted laws to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. Women's status in various sectors of Israeli life can also vary by ethnic or religious background, which makes it difficult to draw generalizations about the most pressing issues facing women in Israel today. In Israel, women enjoy equal access to education. A 2000 amendment to the Women's Equal Rights Law states, "Any woman and man have the equal right to an existence in human dignity, including equality

### **Education**

There are significant gaps in education of disadvantaged women, although considerable progress has been made. In the past three decades there has been a dramatic rise in the level of education of the Arab population. In 1970, half of this population had up to five years of schooling; today half have almost ten years of schooling. The rise in the level of education was highest among women, mostly due to the fact that their initial level of education was much lower than that of men. Educational participation and attainment among the Arab population is rising, but even among the young cohorts the gap with the Jewish population remains substantial. Among the population of 15 and older the average number of years of schooling is 10.2 for Arabs and 13 for Jews. Nearly half of Jews have 13 or more years of schooling compared with fifth of Arabs. Dropout rates for Arab students in 9th and 11th grade were 8.1% in the mid-2000s compared with 3.9% for Jews (OECD, 2010).

- The proportion of women who have more than eight years of schooling rose from 9% in 1970 to 59% in 2000. Over the years the educational gap between Arabs and Jews decreased but did not disappear.
- The Christian women are more educated than the Moslem and Druze women. In 1970, girls comprised only one third of all students in high schools in the Arab education system. Thereafter, the increase in the number of Arab girls attending high schools exceeded the increase in the number of boys, and in 2000 they comprised a little more than half the students (51%).
- The school dropout rate among Arab boys is higher than that of girls. In the 1999/2000 school year 21% of the 9th grade boys dropped out compared with 8% of the girls, in 10<sup>th</sup> grade - 16% of the boys compared with 6% of the girls, and in 11th grade - 12% of the boys compared with 6% of the girls. Overall, 12% of the students in the Arab education system (6% in the Hebrew education system) dropped out of school in the 9th to 11th grades that year.
- The rate of students who earned a matriculation certificate out of all 12th grade students in the Arab education system rose from 33% in 1994 to 46% in 1999 and it is close to the rate in the Hebrew education system (52%).
- The rate of Arab girls who earned a matriculation certificate (51%) was higher than that of the boys (39%). In the Hebrew education system, the rate of entitlement to matriculation among girls was also higher than among boys, but the gap is smaller - 57% and 47% respectively.
- More than a third (36%) of the employed Arab women work in education, primarily as teachers (21% of Jews). 16% of Arab women are employed in the health and welfare sector (17% of Jewish women) primarily as nurses and social workers.
- The proportion of Arab women employed in industry (16%) is larger than that of Jewish women (11%).
- The proportion of Arab women employed in academic and associate professionals and technicians (36%) is similar to the proportion of Jewish women in these occupations (34%).
- In 2010, 59% of Ethiopian women and 41% of Arab-Israel women did not complete high school, compared with only 5% of all Jewish women. Many of these women had not even finished 8th grade.
- In 2010, Ethiopian and Arab-Israeli women had much lower rates than Jewish Israelis: 20% for Ethiopians and 32% for Arab-Israelis, compared with 67% of all Jews.
- At the same time, both Ethiopians and Arab-Israeli women made considerable progress between 2001 and 2010—from 12% to 20% for Ethiopians, and 18% to 32% for Arab-Israelis.
- Among recent high school graduates, the gaps are declining further. In 2009-10, 43% of Arab-Israeli 12th-grade girls and 35% for Ethiopian 12th-grade girls scored high enough on their matriculation exams to meet university entrance requirements, compared with 65% of all Jewish 12th-grade girls.
- Girls from all groups are outperforming boys, particularly among the disadvantaged groups. The matriculation rates among boys were 28% for Arab-Israelis and 18% for Ethiopians, compared with 58% for all Jews.

### **Discrimination against Arab Women in Israel education**

Inequality in Israel takes many forms. Some of the major fault-lines that divide Israeli society, creating relatively privileged and deprived groups, are (Ashkenazim) versus (Mizrahim); men versus women; Israel-born

Jews (Sabar) versus new immigrants (Olim); Orthodox versus secular Jews; rural versus urban dwellers; rich versus poor; left-wing versus right-wing supporters; and gay versus straight people. This report focuses on inequalities between Jewish citizens of Israel the majority and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, a national, non-immigrant minority living in its historical homeland. In recent decades education has gradually become a top priority for Arab citizens especially for women. Women now constitute over 50% of Arabs with academic degrees, and are today perceived as agents of social change and the keystone of the political and social rehabilitation of the Arab community in Israel. Some claim that among the Arab public education is a substitute for their lost land constitutes a source of pride and guarantees a source of income.

The Israel education system aggravates the inequality between the centre and the periphery, between poor and rich, between Arabs and Jews, between men and women, and most importantly between women and women. There are no private schools in Israel, and the state is supposedly providing a good education for all, but only 8% of students accepted to universities are Arabs, and the percentage of Jewish students from developing Towns is not much higher. Looking at the data of the Ministry of Education which clearly show that the percentage of Arab girls who pass the matriculation exams is much lower than that of Jews. The emphasis on Jewish-Zionist values, with no respect for Palestinian national identity, has increased the sense of alienation between the two nationalities and the Arab minority's sense of being disregarded in Israel. The Arab education system in Israel institutionalizes the fear: fear of connection with the past, fear of sharpening the sense of cultural and national identity, and the teachers' fear of engaging current affairs. It is not only the Arab schools that are damaged by this discriminatory education policy; the denial of Palestinian history is also a characteristic of the Jewish textbooks. Education of Arab women is not a new phenomenon among the Palestinian Arabs. It goes back to the British Mandatory authorities, who created two dual educational systems (one for Arabs and one for Jews) in 1917. In the 1930s, the authorities established a boarding school in Beersheba at which Arab children, mostly girls of sheikhs and notables, could continue their high school studies. By 1934, there were two schools, one for boys and one for girls. In May 1948, as a result of the UN resolution to divide Palestine between Jews and Arabs, the school building was taken over by the Israeli Southern Command and turned into a rest and recreation facility for soldiers. When the region became part of the State of Israel in 1948, most of the Arabs have fled to Arab countries. Arab education was only available in the north of Israel. As a result, an entire generation of Arab, especially women, had virtually no access to formal education.

### **Level of Education: A Two-edged Sword**

The level of education for individual Arabs in Israel affects their chances of gaining employment, rates of unemployment, wages, extent of participation in the labor market, choices of occupation, and levels of productivity therein. King et al. (2006) found that education has the greatest independent effect on employment numbers for both Arab and Jewish women. The study also indicates that level of education among Arab women has a greater effect on the chances of gaining employment than among Jewish women, assuming other variables remain fixed. For Arab women with up to eight years of schooling, the rate has declined steadily from 6.2 percent in 1990 to 4.7 percent in 2006. For those with 9-11 years of education it sank from 14 percent to 9.3 percent. Arab women with 12 years of schooling saw their employment rates peak at 25 percent in 1995 and then fall to 16 percent by 2006. The findings of King et al. indicate that the percentage of Arab women who have post-secondary education and are employed in academic, associate professional, technical, and administrative positions is higher than that of Jewish women holding the same level of education 75 percent compared to 61 percent. Clearly, it is prerequisite to increase Arab women's level of education in order to improve their economic status. With respect to education policy, the educational achievements of Arab women exceed those of Arab men. Arab women students take the matriculation exams at higher rates than Arab men, their passing rates are higher than those for Arab men, and they meet the criteria for university admission at higher rates than those for Arab men.

In the area of education, a salient process of improvement was found in rates of student enrolment over different generations, especially among women. Gaps in enrolment rates between men and women were reduced in favour of women. The way of life in the Arab society is undergoing accelerated change from a traditional agrarian society into a modern society. This change partly expresses the desire of youths in a traditional society to adapt to Western surroundings, and in part reflects a policy induced by the government.

One of the salient problems in the area of education is the share of dropouts from the education system at various education levels. Among young Christians up to the age of 20, the dropout rate from 12 school years is 11%. Among the Druze the dropout problem is almost as that among Christians and among the Muslims the dropout rates are significantly higher 20% among non-Bedouin Muslims, and about 32% among the Bedouin. The problem is severe among Bedouin of the non-recognized villages (over 50% dropout among 20-year-olds

and younger). The comparison between dropout rates of people aged 44 and older and the dropout rates of 20-year-olds and younger indicates a substantial improvement over the years. The biggest improvement was achieved in the reduction of dropout rates at the level of elementary school among Bedouin women of the non-recognized villages. This success is primarily due to the establishment of elementary schools in a number of these villages. On the other hand, the least progress was achieved with respect to dropout ratios of Bedouin women for up to 12 years of schooling only 36%; this is not surprising in light of the inadequate number of high schools in these communities.

## **II. Conclusion**

The findings of this study contribute to the anthropological and sociological research corpus on gender and education by emphasizing the complicated multidimensional facets of the contribution of higher education to changing gender roles in Arab societies of Israel. The Arab women in Israel are lacking behind in education not fully because of the racial discrimination, but the problem is inherent in the conservativeness of their society. Many Arab countries still hold traditional views about women's roles and express limitations through government policies, such as sex-segregated universities and gender-biased school curriculum. Furthermore, although many women attend institutions of higher learning, they do not necessarily join the work force, even they joined work force they did not achieve total autonomy, as it was difficult for their society to accept them after they shattered the prevailing feminine role model. The education which Arab women have in Israel is quantitative not qualitative. Further some fundamental questions arise whether education alone makes a difference? Does education necessarily entail both objective and subjective progress in all aspects of life? Despite their autonomous choices, these women function within their own cultural frameworks, adhering to the limitations that society imposes and adopting strategies that suit their situation. In contrast to this position, postmodern feminism emphasizes understanding local contexts and variance, as well as refusal to accept the existence of any inherent characteristics of liberated subjects (Spelman 1988; Talpade Mohanty 1994).

Equality will safeguard both the Jewish and democratic principles upon which Israel was founded, in accordance with the Declaration of Independence, which promises that the state "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." Equality will ensure a stable and peaceful future for Israel, improving social relations and breaking down barriers and prejudices. Equality will strengthen Israel's economy. The lost potential to Israel's economy as a result of the failure to utilise the potentials of Arab women.

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