

Original Paper

The Status of the Arab Women in Israel: Trends, Changes and Factors

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Received: June 4, 2020

Accepted: June 12, 2020

Online Published: June 13, 2020

doi:10.22158/elsr.v1n1p138

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v1n1p138>

Abstract

The term “the Arab society in Israel” represents about one-fifth of the country’s population, with about 80% of the population being Muslim, 12% Christian, and 9% Druze. This is a traditional society, based on the definition of the complex family and the place of each member in this family. The roles reserved for women within this society, especially among Muslims, are domestic roles, linked to marriage and children, the maintenance of the home, and rarely leaving it (Fichtelberg, 2004).

Despite the advancement of the status of women in Israel in general, and women in Arab society in particular, they are still women who are in a weakened position, who fall victim to violence within the family, including by the spouse (Zaatut & Haj-Yahia, 2016) and are in a status of women who do not work, study or are in any kind of training (NEET) (Haj-Yahya, Schnell, & Khattab, 2018). However, this situation is gradually changing. In this article, we will discuss a number of changes in the status and beliefs of Arab women in Israel, as well as known factors affecting the existing situation and the possibility of changing it.

Keywords

Arab women in Israel, trends, status, rights, knowledge gaps

1. Introduction

1.1 Changes in the Status of the Arab Women

The advancement of the status of women in Israel also affected Arab women. Over the past decades, Arab women have become more educated. Between 1993 and 2013, the number of Arab Muslim women eligible to receive a matriculation certificate increased from 39% to 69%, among Bedouin women from 36% to 48%, and among Druze women, the increase was from 49% to 70% of women (Fox, 2017). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), the number of Arab women studying

in higher education increased significantly. For example, in 2000, Arab women constituted 10% of the total number of undergraduate students, while in 2016/2017 this figure increased to 19%. Among graduate students during the same periods, the percentage of Arab women increased from 2% to 15% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Even in the labor force, the number of Arab women is increasing, though not sharply. For example, between 1990 and 2002, the percentage of Moslem women participating in the work rate was 9.8% and increased to 14.2%, among Druze women from 9.6% to 19.5%, and among Christian women, the work rate was higher than at the beginning and was 26.8% In 1990 and increased to 33.8% (Fichtelberg, 2004). It should be noted that, in 2015, 31.5% of working-age Arab women worked outside the home, although it should be noted that 35.2% of the Arab women who worked were employed part-time involuntarily (Mizrahi Simon, 2016).

One of the areas in which the change is slow is the trend of the age of marriage. Between 1970 and 2006, the age of marriage of Arab women in Israel increased from 19.4 to 20.8, while among Jewish women it was 26.6 (Kark, Galilee, & Feuerstein, 2009). A study that examined this trend among Israeli-Palestinian women identified a link between an increase in the age of marriage and an increase in the years of education. It should be noted that, in this case, the authors provided a possible explanation that women who marry at a later age risk not marrying at all, and are therefore more willing to acquire education and seek economic independence in this way (Sabbah-Karkaby & Stier, 2017).

With regard to ownership of property, the Arab woman has inheritance options according to custom, law, and religious law. According to Kark et al. (2009), a common custom in the case of a will is that the woman waives her share of the property for the benefit of the family, or there is a will according to which the woman is not given a part of the inheritance. According to Sharia law, the woman's defined share in the inheritance is half of a male heir's defined share, but it is still mandatory to inherit her a relative share. According to Israeli law, women are entitled to a share equal to the one of men. However, in the absence of a will and due to women's lack of awareness of their rights, the custom of lack of inheritance and denial of property from the woman is common.

1.2 Factors Which Delay and Promote the Woman's Independence in the Arab Society

Many studies have examined the effect of various factors on the world perception of the Arab women in Israel in terms of their perception of their place in society. For example, in a study of 701 Arab Muslim women who define themselves as Palestinians in Israeli territory, a link was found between the women's justification of violence against them and age, education, residential area, and religion. In all of these cases, the acceptance of a patriarchal approach affected women's consent to the violence against them to a greater extent than the rest of the factors examined (Zaatut et al., 2016). It should be noted that, according to a study conducted among 1401 Arab and Jewish women regarding the extent of the violence against them, it was found that among Arab women the rate of participants who reported being victims of violence by their partners was 67%, more than twice compared Jewish women (30-27%). Among participants in this study, it was found that young age, high religiosity, and urban

living were associated with a higher likelihood of partner violence towards the woman (Daoud, Sergienko, & Shoham-Vardi, 2017). On this issue, pressure is exerted on the young Arab women. A study of 40 women between the ages of 18-40 showed that among young women who do not study or work, about half of the cases stem from a gender struggle between the young women who want achieve more in life and chauvinistic men who want to keep women in traditional and submissive roles.

Another factor that is recognized in literature as delaying the promotion of the status of the Arab woman is a patriarchal social outlook. Arab women in Israel are born, raised and living within a traditional patriarchal society (Fichtelberg, 2004; Haj-Yahya et al., 2018). This is a society in which the identity of the woman is defined based on being married and a mother, roles that are concentrated within the home, while the roles of leaving the home are reserved for men (Fichtelberg, 2004). It is a society in which violence against women is normalized, to the point of believing that their partner's violence against them makes them a better person (Zaatut et al., 2016).

Among the factors that promote the status of the Arab woman, a place of honor is given to education. There is agreement in studies that there is a positive link between the number of years of schooling and the willingness of women to seek medical help (Al-Krenawi, Graham, Dean, & Eltaiba, 2004), to purchase medication even without a prescription (Lerner-Geva, Blumstein, Boyko, Farhi, & Benyamini, 2017), and seek economic independence as an alternative to marriage (Sabbah-Karkaby et al., 2017).

At this point, the difference between education and knowledge about the rights granted to women by law should be emphasized. A study based on interviews among 19 Arab-Palestinian women living in Jerusalem or in the South regarding their awareness of economic rights under the law and Sharia law demonstrated women's lack of awareness of their rights. For example, most of the respondents were not aware of the right to inherit (1/2 of a male heir's share), and of the Israeli Civil Law, which makes them heirs entitled to an equal share. According to the respondents' reports, the family often chooses not to inherit property to female offspring in general, whereas in the case of ownership of property such as a house or a vehicle, they do not know any Arab women with property registered in their name. Of the women who did not know how to respond to their rights according to the Muslim law, 2 had academic education (Kark et al., 2009).

Another significant factor is living in an urban environment, especially if it is an urban environment of mixed ethnic origin. In such cases, Arab women are exposed to various values from an early age. The accessibility of cellular technologies has been demonstrated to be associated with a more equal and individualistic worldview among young Arab women, compared to women living in villages, which are mostly ethnically homogenous (Weinstock, Ganayem, Igbaryia, Manago, & Greenfield, 2015). This finding is supported in the study of Kark et al. (2009), when women's exposure to information about their rights in the media has shaped a worldview that further promotes the definition of roles outside the home and expression of own opinion.

It should also be noted that, the acquisition of education does not necessarily guarantee a free choice and a release from traditional roles. According to Karkaby-Sabbah (2009), there is encouragement from

the surrounding society that the woman who studies and acquires a profession will prefer professions that are not far from the traditional roles of the woman, such as nursing and teaching.

2. Discussion

The status of the Arab woman in Israel is far from being equal. The values instilled in these women at home are based largely on religious and traditional perceptions, which create a submissive self-definition based on family ties (marriage, children) (Kark et al., 2009). Knowledge gaps among women prevent them from being aware of their rights even by virtue of the traditional religious approach, as can be seen from the example of the issue of inheritance (Kark et al., 2009).

It can be argued that, there is a trend of slow change for the better. The exposure to new information in the media, especially by cellular means, promotes the willingness of Arab women to go outside the home, and of younger women further to study and find work outside the home (Weinstock et al., 2009). More Arab women go out and study for degrees and professional education (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018) compared to previous decades, and more Arab women go out to work part-time or full-time (Fichtelberg, 2004.) Higher education reduces the risk of the woman being a victim of violence by the partner (Zaatut et al., 2016), provides her economic independence in the event that an independent ability to exist does not exist within the framework of marriage (Karkaby et al., 2017) promotes a position at home that does not necessarily correspond to that of the husband (Kark et al., 2009) and to take care of her own health, including the purchase of nonprescription medication (Lerner-Geva et al., 2017). On the other hand, the attitude of the Arab society to working and studying women is negative. The patriarchal society encourages the study of professions that match the perception of traditional feminine roles, such as teaching and nursing care (Karkaby-Sabbah, 2009.) Women who prefer to study longer and postpone marriage, or who study a profession that deviates from conventions, may find it difficult to marry, to the extent that they depend on the acquired profession of study as a means of livelihood by virtue of the inability to marry at all (Karkaby et al., 2017). In addition, the percentage of women studying and working among Arab women is still significantly lower than the percentage of women studying and working in the Jewish society (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018), and higher education, if any, does not necessarily ensure that the woman will know her rights or be able to realize them in the traditional Arab society (Kark et al., 2009).

Therefore, despite the current trends of change, it can be argued that the status of the Arab woman in Israel is still low, in terms of vulnerability to violence, lack of independence and the definition of roles. In this article, we will examine the status of the Arab woman in Israeli society through the existing literature on the subject. It can be seen that, the trends of improvement, including education and employment, do not necessarily guarantee the Arab woman's ability to live equally in society, as long as Arab society in general continues to be traditional, patriarchal, and defines the woman as an internal and submissive role in relation to the man.

Moreover, the means of promoting independence for Arab women, such as work and study, do not guarantee that they will be aware of their rights according to custom, civil law, or Sharia law. In light of this, it should be asked whether advancing women's knowledge of their rights in a more focused manner in the context of law and religion, while understanding the traditionality of Arab society, can serve as a more effective tool for promoting equality for the Arab woman, in comparison to reliance on studies and education in general. Promotion of knowledge and independence based on traditional perceptions can serve as a topic for a future social intervention research.

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