

PALESTINIAN WORKING WOMEN IN ISRAEL

NATIONAL OPPRESSION AND SOCIAL RESTRAINTS

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ABSTRACT

The paid labor force participation of women in Arab states has always been among the lowest in the world. The same is true for Palestinian Arab women who are citizens of Israel. In sharp contrast, the paid labor participation of Jewish women in Israel is among the highest globally. This paper looks at the consequences of Israeli policy and changing social norms on the Palestinian minority in Israel through the prism of female Palestinian activism in Israel's economy. In particular, it examines the causes, consequences, and changes in the labor force participation of Palestinian women citizens in Israel. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews with some of these women, this paper also examines the impact of their newfound earning power on social attitudes and the division of labor in their homes.

Over the last two decades, Palestinian women in Israel have made remarkable advancements in education. Many have become lawyers, medical doctors, and engineers. However, with respect to women's participation in the paid labor force, Palestinian Arab women citizens of Israel rank among the lowest in the world. In sharp contrast, the paid labor force of Jewish women in Israel ranks among the highest globally (Daoud 2009, 18). Thus far, advances in Palestinian women's education have not engendered a similar shift in occupational status (Awad and Mahmoud 2009). Moreover, while the United Nations asserts that women's economic activity is increasing all over the world (Malhotra and

Mather 1997), the labor participation rate for Palestinian Arab women citizens of Israel has only increased slightly over the past fifteen years.

In this paper, I argue that this marginalization is a direct consequence of Israeli state policies that hinder Palestinian women's access to the paid labor force, while the massive confiscation of their land removes the possibility of continuing their traditional agricultural work. However, as with any complex political and social phenomenon, trying to understand and explain the economic marginalization of Palestinian women in Israel requires a nuanced approach. It requires being sensitive to a multiplicity of forces and factors, but also to the likelihood that their effects are likely to influence one another and that their importance and strength are going to change over time.

Palestinian women citizens of Israel are part of an ethnic and national minority. Of Israel's 7.1 million people, about 1.3 million are Palestinian Israeli citizens, constituting about 19.5 percent of the total population, including the population in Jerusalem.¹ Due to its lack of natural resources and raw materials, Israel is an industrialized country with an economy based on intensive and sophisticated research and development and high-tech processes, tools, and machinery.² The rapid and intensive development of the Israeli economy, along with the vast confiscation Arab lands and discriminatory policies, has marginalized the country's Arab citizens.

This introduces a number of questions: What impact has the creation of the State of Israel had on the economic participation of Palestinian women in the region? How do state policies limit employment participation? How does women's participation in the workforce influence social and political activities and the division of labor inside the home? And finally, what are the possible scenarios for Arab women's participation in the Israeli labor force in the future?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

No single theory can explain the complex reality of Palestinian women's marginalization in the labor force in Israel, or in local or national politics. Israeli anthropologist Danny Rabinowitz (2001, 66) argues that Western liberal democratic theories do not explain the status or behavior of minorities, such as the Palestinian minority in Israel, which

also claim rights to land. Rabinowitz applies the “trapped minority” model to describe certain cases of national and ethnic minorities who are connected to a mother nation stretching across two or more states. These alienated and marginalized minorities become trapped when their homeland is overtaken by recently established states, and dominated by groups that separate members of these minorities from one another (64 – 85).

Historically and ethnically, Palestinians in Israel are part of the Palestinian Arab people. They were shifted to the margins of Israeli society as “a minority in a Jewish state, as citizens in a state that they did not choose, so to speak, a state that is not theirs” (Bishara 1993, 7). In 1948, Israel was established as a Jewish national state. By definition and practice, the Jewish state automatically excluded non-Jewish citizens with respect to nation-building, identity definition, political power, and national priorities and goals (Rabinowitz 2001, 66, Rouhana 1998, 146). While the trapped minority model can explain some aspects of the historical roots of an ethnic minority’s marginalization, it does not explain economic marginalization and social change resulting from this transformation. The dependency theory,³ however, can fill this gap and explain the forced dependency of the Palestinian citizens on the Israeli economy. This theory is largely used to explain the socio-economic conditions and power relations of Palestinians under Israeli occupation (Rosenfeld 2002, 524). It focuses on the occupier’s policies to control people and the economy by subordinating labor and resources to the needs of the occupying force, and undermining the public sector and institutions of the occupied. This perfectly describes the relationship of Palestinians citizens and Israel, according to Azmi Bishara (1998, 218).

But to appreciate the complexity of the situation for women, the theoretical frameworks of patriarchy and socialization, as specifically related to Arab societies, must be factored into the equation. A dominant theory regarding the division of household responsibilities suggests that women are largely confined to the domestic sphere and men to paid employment. According to this theory women’s labor participation is minimal and only secondary (Silver 1993). Other theories emphasize women’s dual role as homemakers and workers, which is derived from “a traditional sex role ideology” (Silver 1993, 182). Women, according to this theory, are dominated by males in both the public and private

domains, and this dual load consumes their time and energy (182).

To explain the phenomena of Palestinian women's economic marginalization I suggest examining three areas of influence: politics, traditions, and socioeconomics. The primary factors are the policies and practices of the Israeli government that have marginalized Palestinians, including women. Secondary factors are the combined effects of tradition, patriarchy, and socialization that contribute to women's exclusion from public activities. However, within this area, there has been a profound transition in the value system among Palestinians towards women's participation in education and work outside the home. A third area of influence is the socioeconomic conditions of these women, including levels of education and social status, which further complicates finding employment. These multiple influences are entwined and interrelated—any one of them taken independently does not address the complexity of the problem. However, if addressed in concert they could potentially foster a breakthrough in moving Palestinian women in Israel out of the margins of society.

To examine my hypothesis, I rely on original research I conducted in 1993 and 2003 with working women and women activists. The first body of work examines the working conditions of Palestinian women and the division of labor within the home. The second relies on a public poll among Palestinians in Israel about women's activism and participation in the public sphere and extensive interviews with women activists. The literature on the general marginalization of the Palestinian minority in Israel is vast, including data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics and surveys conducted by Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and some Israeli research centers. However, there is a serious need for further scholarly research in this area and for updated surveys and data on the topic. This article aims to contribute to this neglected discourse.

THE NATIONAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Palestinian *nakba* (national catastrophe of 1948) and the creation of the State of Israel had, and continue to have, a profound impact on the 156,000 Palestinian Arabs who remained in Israel after the 1948 War. The massive exodus of the Palestinian upper- and middle-class

populations, the urban population, and the entire leadership that had dominated Arab politics in Palestine prior to 1948 (Bishara 1998, 145, Khalidi 2006) had a devastating social, educational, and economic effect on the Palestinians who remained in Israel. The ensuing havoc led to widespread unemployment and impoverishment, and closed schools, clinics and hospitals, businesses, and offices (Morris 2001, 252 – 8). The destruction of hundreds of Arab villages uprooted 20 to 25 percent of the Palestinians who became both citizens and internal refugees within the borders of the new state. Many of these refugees who settled in large Palestinian cities and big villages were subsequently prohibited from returning to their own villages, and this placed a serious economic and social burden on Arab villages and towns (Cohen 2005, 56).

Following the war, Israel adopted a state-managed capitalist system that focused on absorbing and integrating Jewish immigrants, but the governmental development plans completely disregarded the destroyed economy among the Palestinian minority (Schnell, Benenson, and Sofer 1999, 315). Israel denied the Palestinian refugees a right of return, while the 1950 Law of Return encouraged the immigration of Jews, granting any Jew immediate citizenship. These actions were accompanied by a series of laws that aimed to legalize the expropriation of Arab lands, which had begun decades earlier (Cohen 2005, 60 – 70). Among these laws were the 1948 Defense (Emergency) Regulations, which prevented landowners from passing in and out of their lands, the Absentees' Property Law, which legally prohibited the internal displaced Palestinian citizens from returning to their homes, land, and properties, and in early 1950, the Land Acquisition Law, which permitted the state to confiscate Arab lands (60 – 70).

Based on the martial law that was part of the emergency laws used by the British Mandate prior to 1948 (officially July 1922-1947, practically 1917-1947), the new Israeli government imposed military rule on its Palestinian citizens, viewing them as a security risk. Under military rule—formally established on October 21, 1948 and ending in 1966—Palestinian citizens endured military restrictions and regulations; survival was their primary objective (Bishara 1998). The Palestinians were a community traumatized by war, defeat, and the destruction of Arab towns and villages. While the Israeli state viewed the Palestinians who remained in their homes after the war as a security threat, nonetheless, it

granted them citizenship and permanent residence as well as the political rights to vote and run for public office. And yet, they were under military rule. Their conditional integration into state institutions created a complex reality in which the system simultaneously included and excluded them. In an interview with Samira Khoury, a long-time Palestinian activist from Nazareth, she described this difficult period and its effect on Palestinian women saying: “How could we fight for women’s entry into schools, work, and other fields when we were under military rule and needed permission to move from place to place?” (Daoud 2009, 42).

Another critical strategy aimed to control this minority was to create a Palestinian economic dependency on the state to keep the Palestinian economy undeveloped and reliant upon the Jewish sector (Lustick 1980). Prior to 1948, land was the primary source of the Palestinian Arabs’ livelihood; it symbolized their “identity, survival, and security” (Masalha 2005, 24). Most Palestinians lived in small towns and rural communities and survived by farming their own land or by working for other Arab landowners. Farming family plots was usually undertaken by women and old men in order to supplement the younger men’s wages (25).

Land loss was the major impediment to the development of Arab agriculture (Jiryis 1976, 203). By the end of 1955, more than half of the Palestinians in Israel lived off agriculture. However, as the state continued to confiscate the vast areas of Palestinian land, this percentage decreased to 38.7 percent in 1963, 11 percent in 1981, 4.6 percent by 1992 (Rouhana 1998, 91), and about 3 percent in 2002.⁴

One of the most far-reaching economic, social, and demographic changes was the transformation of Palestinian people from village-dwelling peasantry to village-dwelling wage laborers (Bishara 1998). Shifting the economic focus to employment in the cities meant that the Arab population in Israel became increasingly dependent on the Jewish economy. The proportion of Arab workers in the Jewish sector steadily rose from 76.8 percent in 1982 to 84.7 percent in 1993 (1998). While the village remained the center of social and political activity, the city became the center of economic activity. Palestinian working men started leaving their villages each morning to work in Israeli cities, not returning until evening.

During this period, the weak and threatened minority looked in-

ward and drew increasingly upon its own culture and traditions as a way of countering the threat from the state. Thus, Arab society became more restrictive vis-à-vis women and women's movements. And yet, at the same time, the interaction with a ruling society deeply influenced the structure and function of the family. With the loss of so much land, the *hamula* (extended family) structure was gradually replaced by the nuclear family. This structural shift, from being responsible for an extended family hierarchy to being responsible for the nuclear family, afforded men and women more freedom to create new patterns of behavior (Daoud 2009, 6).

Several leading scholars argue that Israel had a deliberate policy of encouraging the traditional structure among Palestinians to increase control over them (Rouhana 1998, 91). The hamula was used to secure Arab votes for dominant Zionist parties especially during the military rule. Paradoxically, however, Israeli policies were fostering change. The men returned to their villages influenced by city life and Western culture, which undermined the old structures and many of the old values.

ECONOMIC CHANGES AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE 1967 WAR

The 1948 War separated and isolated the Palestinians citizens of Israel from the rest of the Palestinians and Arab countries. The 1967 War, resulting in the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (which had been under Jordanian rule since 1948), reconnected them. This reconnection had a tremendous effect on Palestinians, both women and men. The war led to a radical change in the economic-occupational structure. With the rising cost of living and inflationary prices in Israel, Arab families had no choice but to send their daughters and wives into the labor force. The demand for cheap, unskilled labor facilitated and accelerated the absorption of Palestinian women into the Israeli economy for the first time in history (Samed 1976, 162). In the early 1970s Palestinian women were the main source of cleaning labor, constituting an estimated 50 to 90 percent of subcontracted workers, the lowest paid category in Israel's industrial employment structure (Bernstein 1986, 412 – 3). In the 1980s, the oppressive textile industry in Arab villages became the principal source of employment for Palestinian women (Makhoul 1982, 97).

The influx of Palestinians from the occupied territories into the unskilled labor market in Israel increased the insecurity of the Palestinians in Israel. Palestinian workers were paid even less than Israeli workers, both Arabs and Jews. This influx drove up competition for unskilled work, and it became easier for employers to fire employees without notice (Moors 1995).

A growing demand for Jewish women in the service sector—especially in tourism, which is of great economic and political importance for Israel—created more manual labor opportunities for Arab and *Mizrahi* (Oriental) Jewish women, since the service sector employed mainly the Ashkenazi (Jewish, of European, Yiddish-speaking origin) women (Bernstein 1986, 403).

The 1970s also witnessed an increased number of Arab graduates, including women, from Israeli universities. This trend continued in the 1980s, 1990s, and continues today (Daoud 2009). However, as of 2006, 43 percent of Arab women with academic degrees were unemployed (Awad 2007), and Arab faculty in Israeli universities (there are eight) reached only 1.4 percent.⁵ Among 256 women judges, only five are Arab women.⁶

From 2004 to 2006, while Israel as a whole experienced significant economic growth, poverty increased among Arabs (52.15 percent of Arab households were below the poverty line, compared to 15.9 percent of Jews), and the unemployment rate among Arabs remained higher than among Jews (11.30 percent for Arabs compared to 9.2 percent among Jews), even as they were concentrated in the lowest-paid industries.⁷

Several developments in the 1990s increased the marginalization of Palestinian women in Israel's labor force. In the 1990s an intense wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union to Israel—including about one million Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants—had a serious and negative effect on Arab labor in Israel. A large proportion of these immigrants were highly educated and competed with Arabs for skilled work. At the same time, many also competed for unskilled work in blue-collar jobs in hotels and factories. A common refrain among Arab women is expressed by one Galilean working woman:

They even took away the few hours a week we got to work in a hotel. The manager prefers Russians who live in the same city, over us. It saves the workplace transportation costs from the village to the hotel,

especially on the Jewish Sabbath, when there is no public transportation. We used to make more money on the Sabbath, but now our earnings are way down. (Daoud 2009)

Moreover, during the 1990s—especially after the Oslo agreements between Israel and the Palestinian leadership, followed by Israel's agreement with Jordan—there was a further loss of women's jobs because it became cheaper for Israeli factories to operate from Jordan and Egypt. Thus, by 2001, the 1994 shift of textile production out of the Galilee to Egypt and Jordan resulted in the retention of only 1,700 women out of 10,700 textile workers, the majority of whom had been Arabs.⁸ The relocation of the textile industry in these new states had a tremendous effect on Arab villagers working in this industry and has dramatically increased the unemployment among them (Schnell, Benenson, and Sofer 1999, 317.) While, overall, women in Israel have become much more involved in the labor market and Jewish women's participation exceeded 56.0 percent⁹ in 2008 (compared to 33.0 percent in 1975 and 45.0 percent in 1995) Palestinian women's participation in the Israeli workforce stood at 12.0 percent in 1986, and at 18.6 percent in 2008 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2006, 2008). Table 1 illustrates this gap.

While no law specifically denies them employment, Palestinians in Israel experience systematic discrimination. Sharon Rabin Margalioth (2004) argues that the most significant characteristic of the Israeli civilian labor market in relation to its Arab participants is the fact that the labor force is highly segregated. They are denied employment in skilled and high-wage positions, including jobs in public service and government-owned companies such as the Bank of Israel, the Council for Higher Education, the Second Authority for Television and Radio, the Nature and National Parks Protection Authority, the Postal Authority, the Government Companies Authority, the Antiquities Authority, the Israel Broadcasting Authority, and the Airport Authority.¹⁰ Over the past couple of decades, several amendments were passed to foster change in Arab representation in public service; in 1995, a major piece of legislation, the Equal Opportunities in Employment Act of 1988, was amended to explicitly outlaw discriminatory practices in the workplace based on national origin, nationality, and religion. In 2000, the government, as an employer, was required to implement an affirmative action policy in

Table 1: Jewish and non-Jewish women age 15 and over in paid labor force in Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics)

Jewish Women		Non-Jewish Women	
Year	Percentage	Year	Percentage
1985	37.50	1986	12.00
1990	41.10	1990	12.25
1995	45.40	1995	18.33
2005	50.80	2005	12.80
2008	56.70	2008	18.60

favor of Arab citizens, and in its appointment of directors to government corporations (Margalioth 2004).

However, and despite the recent passage of several laws requiring proper representation of Arabs in state institutions, data shows that of the approximately 50,000 employees in government companies, Arab employees constitute only 0.1 percent, and only 5.5 percent of Israel's civil servants were Arabs (Awad 2006). Arab residential areas are excluded from national planning projects and industrial zoning approvals. They suffer from inadequate infrastructure, on top of large declines in agricultural employment and a lack of economic opportunities following the confiscation of their land (Okun and Friedlander 2005, 165). Palestinian women are further disadvantaged and suffer from the lack of day care and public transportation. By wearing head covers and speaking Hebrew with an accent, they suffer further discrimination when seeking employment.¹¹

CULTURAL CONTEXT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

The female labor force participation rate in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the lowest in the world (Robinson 2005).¹² Despite periods of high economic growth, decreased female illiteracy, increased urbanization, and lower fertility rates, this fact has not changed much throughout the region's history (2005). For a long time, many scholars writing about Arab societies argued that the reason for the low labor force participation was mainly cultural (Semyonov, Levin-Epstein, and Brahm 1999, 118). Jennifer Olmsted (2009) posits that the reality is more

complicated and that there is a tension in feminist literature about this argument. References to culture and norms are typical for mainstream Western and Arab scholars who tend to emphasize the “constant” in Arab culture rather than the “changing,” the “oneness” of the Arab mind rather than the “pluralism” (Barakat 1993). The constants account for the status of Arab women. Even the United Nations (2005) report on women’s inequality in Israel sought cultural explanations for Palestinian women’s marginalization in the labor force stating, “Low unemployment among Arab women is mainly due to the traditional attitudes on women’s role, and lack of support from husbands and families.” They ignored state discrimination, and seemed to be looking for easy explanations to a complex phenomenon.

Patriarchy was identified as one of the fundamental features of the Middle Eastern family, which has long been described as a patriarchal unit (Moghadam 2004). Patriarchy is the familial and societal ideology that gives males superiority and maintains women’s relative inferiority. The Arab traditional family constitutes an economic and social unit in all three Arab patterns of living—rural, urban, and bedouin (Barakat 1993, 23). All of the family members cooperate to secure their livelihood and to improve their collective place in society. While the centrality of the family as a basic socioeconomic unit is now facing challenges from state policies and socially progressive institutions, a hierarchical network of interdependent kinship relations continues to prevail (Barakat 1993). Olmsted (2005, 55) argues that Islam has also played a role in shaping the nature of the patriarchal contract in the region and that the terms of men’s and women’s rights and responsibilities are laid out in religious doctrine. However, Olmsted also argues that Arab economics and cultures are in transition and that many changes are taking place in these societies as the agricultural economic base has disappeared and been replaced by a wage-based economy. These changes are apparent in education, fertility rates, women’s employment, and marriage patterns. According to her, as Arab society changes, the strength of the patriarchal contract is beginning to erode (55). In her research, Arlene Elowe MacLeod (1991) examines the impact of veiled women’s employment in Cairo, Egypt on household relations, suggesting that more veiled women are seeking employment. She argues that veiling is “found to be not reactionary behavior” but a “political struggle to fight their

inequality while accepting their subordinating status” (56).

In recent years, the trend of low female labor force participation rate in the MENA has begun to change; greater numbers of females are entering the labor force than ever before. Still the number is very low, and, while there is significant variation among countries, the estimate of the average unemployment rate in the MENA is about 15 percent (Robinson 2005, 2).

Some feminist theorists argue that industrialized societies are also patriarchal (Moghadam 2004). They hold that patriarchy crosses cultural, geographical, ethnic, status, class, and generational boundaries. Feminist theorists suggest that different forms of patriarchy exist, such as the patriarchy of the pre-modern family and the patriarchy of industrial societies.¹³ In recent years, notions of culture, patriarchy, and other overarching concepts have become more critically defined and interpreted in a way that makes “cultural” talk highly problematic. Many researchers argue that ideas of patriarchy have encountered several challenges as a result of economic development, demographic transition, legal reform, and the increased women’s education in the Middle East (Barakat 1993, MacLeod 1991, Moghadam 2004).

Socialization is another factor suggested by many scholars as a primary influence on the scarcity of women in the public sphere, specifically in the labor force and politics. They consider families and schools to be the social agents that play the greatest role in shaping and reinforcing gender concepts (Wharton 2005). Socialization is “the way children are introduced to the values and attitudes of their society and how they learn what will be expected of them in their adult roles” (Almond and Powell 1988, 34 – 5). From early childhood, most girls are taught that their primary mission in life is to marry, have children, and be housewives. If there is a need for them to work outside the home, women are discouraged from pursuing any occupation that is likely to conflict with their domestic role. Amy S. Wharton (2005) argues that gendered social expectations are passed from generation to generation by socialization. Sexual identities and divisions of social function are reinforced by religion, the legal system, and the family structure (2005, 127 – 8). In Arab society, too, the family is viewed as a fundamental unit of society and stresses the mother’s role in the socialization of children and transmitting cultural values.

Valentine Moghadam (2004, 137) argues that functions carried out

by women in families of the MENA are very similar to Talcott Parsons's functionalist perspective, which describes two functions carried out by women (wives and mothers) in the modern family: "to socialize children into society's normative system of values and inculcate appropriate status expectations, and to provide a stable emotional environment that will cushion the (male) worker from the psychological damage of the alienating occupational world." On the other hand, the husband "plays the 'instrumental' role of earning the family's keep and maintaining discipline" (137).

Hanna Herzog (1999, 55), a scholar at Tel Aviv University, suggests that Israeli society is still "fundamentally a gendered society and the dichotomy between public and private spheres persist." Israeli men's well-established role in the military has been used to reinforce the traditional roles of women and their obligation to the household and children. As a result, women continue to perceive themselves as "ignorant" about defense and national issues and as "unqualified" to deal with politics (Agassi 1991, 211). Still patriarchy, division of labor, and socialization did not prevent Jewish women in Israel from reaching one of the highest rates in women's employment in the world.

In most spheres of their lives, Palestinians in Israel are not static but dynamic (Daoud 2009, 201, Kanaaneh 2002, Rouhana 1998). The waves of change have affected large segments of Palestinian society to differing degrees. They are more profound among educated women, middle-class professionals in mixed Arab-Jewish cities (Rouhana 1998, 197) and among Christian women, secular women, and women from the Galilee, more than other religious or demographic groups¹⁴ (Daoud 2003). Change is also taking place among women with fewer years of education and blue-collar workers and among the Palestinian public in general (2003). For instance, family planning became part of the social process among Palestinians in Israel (Kanaaneh 2002). Data show that since the 1970s, the fertility rate among Palestinian women has decreased significantly: In the 1970s, Palestinian Christian women had an average of 2.2 children (fewer than the Jewish women's 2.7). In 2005, Muslim women had an average of 4.0 children, and Druze women had an average of 2.6 children.¹⁵

Henry Rosenfeld and Majed Al-Haj (1990), for example, argue that the Arab society in Israel does not reject the idea of working women.

Traditionally, Arab women have assisted their husbands in field and farm work, viewing this work as part of their familial responsibilities. The low participation rate of Palestinian women in Israel's workforce now has more to do with the type of jobs available, the location of the jobs, and the fact that women are responsible for young children. Former Israeli Member of Knesset Member Tamar Gozanski, of the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, pointed out that state discriminatory policies have not created employment opportunities in Arab locations and have failed to provide child care for working women, while both efforts are made in the Jewish localities (Daoud 2003, 175).

A representative poll conducted in 2003 shows that the vast majority of women support higher education for Arab women and the basic right of women to work, and so did 88 percent of Arab men (Daoud 2003, 195). However, the poll reveals that this support was lower among those who identified themselves as religious and among Palestinian Bedouin. In a poll conducted by Women Against Violence (WAV), approval for women's education received the support of about 95 percent, while supporters of women working numbered 82 percent.¹⁶ However, the research noted that the support for women working is conditional. Several factors weigh into the equation, such as the availability of jobs close to the woman's residence, day care, and transportation. Another factor is the suitability of the job for women. For example driving a bus is not considered to be a suitable job for some women.¹⁷

EDUCATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Several researchers suggest a positive correlation between education and female labor force participation (MacLeod 1991, Robinson 2005). Increased education can broaden an employee's skill set. Moreover, higher levels of education are generally associated with lower fertility rates, which would result in a higher participation in the labor force (Robinson 2005, 8). However, Robinson (2005) argues that education cannot increase wages or the probability of finding employment for the entire labor force. Unless there are changes in aggregate demand, education and labor force participation cannot be positively correlated no matter how great the increase in education level of the total population (2005). Anju Malhotra and Mark Mather (1997) also argue that these

theories do not necessarily apply to realities in the developing world. Empirical data do not always support this claim. Class and ethnic norms must be considered. Norms, for example, can prevent wealthy women from seeking employment (599). MacLeod (1991, 4), on the other hand, found in her study in Cairo, that the lower-middle-class women work primarily on low-level positions while upper-class women work on different professional jobs.

Researchers have identified many factors that contribute to female labor force participation. These factors include women's education and skill level, availability of child care, attractiveness of jobs, husband's income/occupation/education, woman's motivation to work, and factors related to the character of the economy, the size of the informal sector, sex, wages, and others (Robinson 2005, 5). In her study in Bethlehem in the West Bank, Jennifer Olmsted (1997, 143) found that women with low education levels were less likely to be labor force participants and thus had less access to income.

In 1951, the Israeli Parliament passed the Compulsory Education Law. This law guarantees eight years of free education to all children between the ages of five and thirteen. Palestinians quickly began to view education as a way to cope with the crisis of their minority status and took advantage of the law. Over the years, the proportion of girls in Arab schools rose dramatically from 18.6 percent of total students in 1948-1949 (compared to 49 percent in Jewish schools), to 47.3 percent in 1990-1991 (similar to that of the Jewish sector). In 2003, illiteracy among Arab women was only 14.7 percent (4.5 percent among Jewish women). With respect to higher education, 50 percent of Arab students were females, and as high as 56 percent at Haifa University in the north where most Palestinians reside (Al-Haj 2001).

But the support for women's education was not the same as the support for women's employment. The increasing demand for teachers in Arab localities created employment opportunities for women, but women who worked mostly came from a low socio-economic stratum. Wealthy families rejected women's work, even in skilled professions such as teaching. A Palestinian woman recalls her personal experience of that time by saying:

In the 1950s and 1960s, there were great restrictions on what a woman

could do. I finished high school and many girls in my class became teachers. I also wanted to be a teacher, but my father refused. He was against women working outside the home. At that time only women who needed money worked. Our economic situation was good, so my father asked me: "Why do you need a job? Do you lack money?" He also said, "You can study and get an education." (Daoud 2009)

With the growth of the Israeli universities in the 1970s, many Palestinian women entered university and became positive role models for young Palestinian females in their home villages and towns.

Over the years, teaching in Arab schools became a predominantly female profession, and female education gained in economic and social value. In 2003-2004, Arab women in the teaching profession reached 70 percent—compared to 88 percent in the Jewish sector (Central Bureau of Statistics 2006). Data show that the employment rate of Arab women who have more than fifteen years of education is 64 percent, seven times that of women with five to eight years of education (Central Bureau of Statistics 2002, 6). Their employment statistics are roughly divided as follows: 36 percent work in education, 16 percent in health and welfare (mainly as nurses and social workers), and another 16 percent in industry (Daoud 2003). The official statistics do not give us information about the other 30 percent of employed Palestinian women. I suppose that some of the women work in businesses, mainly small ones, managed by other women, and another portion works in the service industry and other blue-collar jobs. The conclusion to be drawn from this data is that education remains a strong indicator for the participation of Palestinian women in the paid labor force in Israel but not necessarily a deciding factor.

RELIGION AND LOCATION

Participation in the Israeli labor force varies among ethnic and religious groups (Israeli 1991, 168). Among Palestinian women in Israel, differences also exist according to geographic region, religious affiliation, and education. Palestinian Christian women reflect the highest percentage of Palestinian women in the labor force: 44.9 percent versus 14.7 percent of Muslim women and 19.6 percent of Druze women (Central Bureau of Statistics 2006). This can be explained by the facts that the majority of Christians reside in urban centers where job opportunities are greater

than in the villages and that the fertility rate among them is even lower than among the Jews and the rest of the Palestinians (Central Bureau of Statistics 2006). Education is another factor where Christians and Muslims are deeply divided. During the mandate period, Christians enjoyed private schools supported by missionaries, resulting in educated and trained women. The differences between Christian and Muslim Palestinians in education persist after Israel's creation. Moreover, religious restrictions among Christians are weaker than those of other Palestinian groups. Palestinian Bedouin¹⁸ women in the Negev have the highest unemployment rates in Israel, with only six percent of women participating (Central Bureau of Statistics 2002, 6). The explanation for this statistic rests on both the state's devastating policies, affecting the 130,000 Bedouin who constitute about one percent of Palestinian citizens, and the lack of enforcement of other laws. Some of the policies include the forcible settlement in seven cities of half of the Bedouin population, while the rest of the Bedouin live in forty unrecognized villages lacking basic services such as electricity, water, schooling, and paved roads. These policies resulted in high levels of poverty and crime (Abu Sa'ad 2005, 113 – 41). Moreover, officials do not enforce laws that prohibit taking multiple wives, or others that guarantee education, both of which would benefit these women.¹⁹

TRANSPORTATION

Arab locations in Israel suffer from extremely limited access to public transportation. The distance of Arab villages to Jewish cities limits job opportunities for Arabs seeking employment outside the Arab economy. Margalioth (2004, 846) argues that this is especially disadvantageous for women, "who, for cultural reasons, are expected to work close to home." Once again, though, this argument offers a simple explanation for the lack of Palestinian women's participation in the workforce, while ignoring the role of state policies on the economic status of Arabs who cannot afford to buy cars, or who lack public transportation in the most of the Arab localities. According to a 2005-2006 research study conducted by Kayan, a feminist organization based in Haifa, while an increasing number of Palestinian women have drivers licenses, between 37 and 44 percent cannot afford to buy a car, and 23 percent do not have their own cars due to social reasons.²⁰

EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK

Despite Israeli law, which calls for equal pay for equal work, many women are paid less than men for similar tasks. The average income for women in Israel is 57 percent of the average male income; the average income of an Arab man is 68 percent of a Jewish man. One study found that in Nazareth, the largest Arab city in Israel, 61 percent of women receive less than the legal minimum wage, 72 percent work without any legal contract, and only 35 percent receive payment for any kind of overtime. Further, when asked what and how much the minimum wage was, only 30 percent of the women could answer correctly.²¹

DAY CARE

Out of 1,600 day care centers for children under the age of three that receive government assistance, only 25 operate in Arab communities (Zoabi 2009). But while the Israeli government has done little to assist with integrating Palestinian women into workplace, Arab local government or Arab investors have done little, too. Without exception, all Palestinian women interviewed said that they received no assistance from the state or from their local councils (Daoud 1993).

CONCLUSION

The political marginalization of the Palestinian minority in Israel creates economic marginalization. However, for Palestinian women the case is even more complex, as they are also restricted by traditional norms and social attitudes.

Palestinian working women in Israel are part of a marginalized national minority, transitioning through social change in attitudes toward women's education, work outside the home, and family responsibilities. Palestinian women in Israel are no longer undervalued or ignored, and they are determined to play a significant role that matches their economic and social contribution to their families and society. However, while social attitudes among Arabs in Israel are changing, state policy continues to impede progress.

Palestinian society today is very young, with 41.1 percent of the population aged 14 years and under. With respect to education, 94.4 per-

cent of Palestinians in Israel today are literate.²² This minority, including its women, is no longer the weak and defeated minority of the early years of the state. There is a great deal of pent-up frustration that needs to be addressed. My assumption is that the continued economic marginalization of the Palestinians in Israel will lead to dangerous consequences in the majority-minority relationship, possibly leading to confrontation.

It seems that some Israeli policymakers are aware of the urgency of this problem. In recent years, several governments, on both the left and right, have expressed their commitment to changing the situation. Several parliamentary and governmental committees were established to examine ways to deal with it and promised change. However, new policies have not yet been implemented (Sikkuy 2008).

Recently, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, from the right-wing Likud Party, expressed his government's intentions to encourage employment among Arab women as a step to improve and strengthen Israel economy. Netanyahu's declaration was made during a visit of the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development to Israel few months ago.²³ The future will tell if his declaration will motivate change. But, as this paper indicates, it is the ideology and practice of the Jewish state to invest in, and encourage, Jewish labor, while keeping the Palestinian minority on the political and economic margins. Empowerment of this minority is seen as a threat to the Jewish majority, which seeks control through dependency.

Accepting this reality, I suggest an alternative course of action for the Arab community. Continue Arab public demand for state solutions to the economic disparity, and encourage women to take a central role in the fight. But, do not stop there. Encourage local Arab authorities and private Arab investors to invest in their communities, create jobs, and open private day care. In short, do what the state fails to do, and do not to wait for the goodwill of Israel's government.

NOTES

1. About 83 percent of the Palestinians were Muslim, 8.6 percent were Christians, and 8.4 percent were Druze (Central Bureau of Statistics 2007, 88).

2. See Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs "Sectors of the Israeli Economy": <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Facts+About+Israel/Economy/ECONOMY+Sectors+of+the+Economy.htm> (accessed on October 25, 2011).

3. See for example the work of the leading Egyptian economist, Samir Amin (1974), who developed this theory in the Muslim world.

4. See Shehadeh Mtaness, *Unemployment and Participation in the Labor Force among the Arab Minority in Israel*: http://www.mada-research.org/UserFiles/file/publications_pdf/unemployment-arab-arb.pdf (accessed on January 3, 2012).

5. See Yaser Awad in “We Demand Decent Arab Representation, 2010”: <http://www.almadar.co.il/news.aspx?cid=77&aid=13024> (accessed on January 3, 2012).

6. See *Women Against Violence, Labor Committee regarding the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel*, 2007: <http://www.wavo.org/?LanguageId=2&System=Item&MenuId=9&PMenuId=9&CategoryId=3&ItemId=15> (accessed on October 25, 2011).

7. See Governor of the Bank of Israel Stanley Fischer’s to the Third Annual Jewish-Arab Business Conference on November 13, 2007: <http://www.bankisrael.gov.il/deptdata/neumim/neum250e.htm> (accessed on October 25, 2011) and <http://www.stophthewall.org/downloads/pdf/Arab-L.pdf> (accessed on January 10, 2012).

8. See <http://www.stophthewall.org/downloads/pdf/Arab-L.pdf> (accessed on January 10, 2012).

9. This is even higher from data in the United States where women comprised 46.5 percent of the total U.S. labor force. See United States Department of Labor: <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/Qf-laborforce-08.htm> (accessed on January 10, 2012).

10. See <http://www.stophthewall.org/downloads/pdf/Arab-L.pdf> (accessed on January 10, 2012).

11. See Mada al-Carmel—Arab Center for Applied Social Research: <http://www.mada-research.org> (accessed on October 25, 2011) and Safaa Yonis, *Israeli Racism against Veiled Women*, a panel by Mada al-Carmel: <http://www.mada-research.org/?LanguageId=2&System=Item&MenuId=32&PMenuId=20&MenuTemplateId=1&CategoryId=29&ItemId=307&ItemTemplateId=1> (accessed on October 25, 2011).

12. Many studies suggest that official labor force participation statistics underestimate the actual labor contribution of women especially in developing countries. The International Labor Office for example reports a female participation rate of 22 percent in 2005, compared to a male participation rate of 77 percent. See more information on the March 2008 International Conference on “The Unemployment Crisis in the Arab Countries” at http://www.arab-api.org/conf_0308/p7.pdf (accessed on October 25, 2011).

13. See the useful discussion on this topic by Valentine Moghadam (2004).

14. Seventy-one percent of the Palestinians live in 116 different localities, largely in rural areas and only nine of them are cities. Twenty-four percent of Palestinians live in eight mixed cities that have a Jewish majority (Central Bureau of Statistics 2002). The majority of the Christian Palestinians live in urban areas concentrated in the Galilee region. See http://www1.cbs.gov.il/www/hodaot2006n/11_06_274e.pdf (accessed on January 10, 2012).

15. See http://www1.cbs.gov.il/www/hodaot2006n/11_06_274e.pdf (accessed on January 10, 2012).

16. See *Women Against Violence*: <http://www.wavo.org/?LanguageId=2&System=Item&MenuId=9&PMenuId=9&CategoryId=3&ItemId=15> (accessed on

October 25, 2011).

17. See Women Against Violence: <http://www.wavo.org/?LanguageId=2&System=Item&MenuId=9&PMenuId=9&CategoryId=3&ItemId=15> (accessed on October 25, 2011).

18. There are 130,000 Palestinian Bedouin of the Negev—constituting 11 percent of the Palestinian citizens of Israel (Abu Sa'ad 2005).

19. See Intisar Hujirat's July 2007 piece, "The Palestinian Bedouin Woman in the Negev": http://www.mediterraneas.org/print.php3?id_article=632 (accessed on October 25, 2011).

20. Among the Druze, women are not allowed to drive for "religious reasons." However many Druze women challenge this and drive cars (Daoud 2009). See Kayan: Feminist Organization, *Women Mobility among Palestinian Women in Israel*: <http://www.adalah.org/newsletter/ara/mar07/kayan.pdf> (accessed on October 25, 2011).

21. See The Arab Association for Human Rights' article entitled "Palestinian Arab Women in Israel": http://www.mediterraneas.org/article.php3?id_article=148 (accessed on October 25, 2011).

22. See Mada al-Carmel—Arab Center for Applied Social Research: <http://www.mada-research.org> (accessed on October 25, 2011).

23. See a February 22, 2010 article entitled "Arab Women's Employment: The Key is Day Care": <http://www.blacklabor.org/?p=17045> (accessed on October 25, 2011).

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