

Topic: **Women**

Updated: **June 2014**

- Women comprise 49.5% (787,900) of the total Arab population in Israel. Among Jews, women comprise 50.6% of the population. (2.96 million, 2011 figures).²
- Scholars agree that Arab women in Israel are doubly marginalized: first, as women in a predominantly patriarchal Arab society, where men are perceived as the decision-makers and women as inferior and ideally subservient, and second, as part of an Arab minority in a Jewish nation state.³
- Socio-economic figures provided by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics and non-governmental research institutes clearly show that Arab women suffer from inferior social status compared to Arab men. Only one in five Arab women participates in the civilian labor force. The unemployment rate is higher among Arab women than men and they are offered lower salaries for the same job, compared to men (See fact sheet on “Employment”).⁴
- However, life expectancy of Arab females is almost four years longer than that of Arab males, and Arab females enjoy higher academic achievement than Arab males (see fact sheets on “Health” and “Education”).

Violence Against Arab Women

- One of the most prominent manifestations of Arab women’s inferior status is the phenomenon of violence: Estimates indicate that 50% of married Arab women are beaten at least once a year; 25% are beaten at least once every six months. However, very few women come forward to report these instances of violence.⁵
- Findings of a survey published in *Ha’aretz* in November 2008 among Israeli Arab

¹ Compiled by Prof. Elie Rekhess, Associate Director, Crown Center for Jewish and Israel Studies, Northwestern University

² CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2011*, table 2.10.

³ Ruth Eglash, “Status of Israeli women improves little over decade.” *Jerusalem Post*, March 7, 2010; Yoav Stern, “Study: Israeli Arab attitudes toward women undergoing change.” *Haaretz*, August 5, 2008.

⁴ Ruth Sinai, “Arab women - the most exploited group in Israeli workforce.” *Haaretz*, February 1, 2008.

⁵ See background report on “Combating Violence Against Women”, prepared by the New Israel Fund, available at: <http://www.nif.org/get-involved/nif-in-a-box/Combating-Violence-Against-Women-Background-Tools-for-Discussion.pdf>.

women show that some 70% of them believed women who are pushed, slapped or struck by their male partners were not victims of domestic violence. Moreover, 73% believed women whose partners curse or humiliate them were not victims of violence.⁶

- “Honor killings” are still a regular occurrence within the Arab society in Israel. Arab Israeli women have been murdered by relatives for dishonoring the family, sometimes for as little as speaking to a man. These crimes often go unreported as witnesses usually refuse to testify.
- According to official figures, in 2005 there were seven cases of killing in the name of “family honor”, six in 2006, one in 2007 and one in 2008. However, Israeli Arab feminist organizations estimate that the actual figures are much higher, claiming that many women whose deaths are suspicious, yet labeled death by suicide or accident, are murdered in the name of “family honor.”⁷
- A November 2010 study by Itach (Women Lawyers for Social Justice) showed that 18 women were murdered by their husbands or partners by that point in the year; seven of them were from the country’s Arab population. According to the study out of 148 detectives specially trained to work in domestic violence cases, only 33 speak Arabic, 10 are from the Arab community and only two are Arab women, making it more difficult for Arab women to feel comfortable about reporting domestic abuse.⁸
- In 2012, the police of the Central District declared, for the first time in nearly a decade, that there had been no “honor killings”.
- The organization Na’am (Arab Women in the Center) claims partial responsibility for the better conditions. Their outreach program helped foster a greater awareness among Arab women about their rights at home.
- In addition, the police tout their contributions in a program, launched in 2010, aiming at identifying and protecting local women at-risk, in order to reach out to them and their male relatives before perceived transgressions led to murder.⁹

Arab Women and Polygamy

- A 2011 qualitative study conducted among Bedouin women in the Negev found that the women live in a state of poverty, neglect and anxiety. The Arab women fear divorce; experience serious deterioration in their economic situation once their husband marries an additional wife, and typically suffer physical and emotional abuse after the addition marriage. The study followed an intensive anti-polygamy media campaign launched by a coalition of Israeli Arab women’s organizations in 2010.
- Since polygamous marriages are not recognized by the state, no official statistics exist. However,

⁶ Ha’aretz, November 24, 2008.

⁷ Yael Slater, *Enhancing Equality between men and women in the Euromed Region: Situation Analysis 2009 – Israel* (Adva Center for Social Justice, September 2009), p. 17, available at: http://www.adva.org/Uploaded/EuroMed%20Report_Final%2004-11-09%20WEBSITE.pdf.

⁸ Jerusalem Post, November 25, 2010.

⁹ Jerusalem Post, April 4, 2013.

the Knesset's Research and Information Center estimates that between 20% to 36% of Bedouin households in the Negev region are polygamous.

Arab Women Civic Organizations

- A public opinion poll conducted among Arab men and published in August 2008 is evidence of a change in attitude. It showed that contemporary Arab men tend to accept a more central role of women in public life than in the past.¹⁰
- Also indicating an increased awareness of the status of women in Arab society is the growing number of Arab NGOs serving women. According to 2004 figures, Arab women NGOs constitute 11% of all Israeli women NGOs, twice the proportion of Arab NGOs in the general number of NGOs in Israel, (5%).¹¹ These NGOs are active in four main fields: welfare (48%), citizen's rights (20%), education (15%), culture and leisure time (11%) and others (6%).
- Among the most prominent and well known Arab NGOs dealing with women's issues are Women Against Violence, Kayan ("Being") – Feminist Organization, Assiwar ("Bracelet") – The Feminist Arab Movement in Support of Victims of Sexual Abuse, and B ("Children") Center. These organizations and others serve Arab women and strive to provide shelters for those who are victims of violence or sexual harassment, promote employment opportunities for Arab women, and struggle for female empowerment in the Arab society.

Arab Women and Politics

- Israeli Arab women have been politically active in left wing Jewish-Zionist parties (mainly the Labor party), in Jewish-Arab parties, such as the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE), and in national-secular parties, such as the National Democratic Alliance (BALAD). However, female candidates have been typically placed in unrealistic positions (fourth or fifth on the list of Knesset candidates). In other parties, such as the United Arab List, which represents Islamic constituencies in Israel, women are almost completely absent from the top ten places on the list of candidates.
- In 1999, (the elections for the Fifteenth Knesset) an Arab woman named Hussniya Jabara of the Meretz party was elected as a Knesset Member. Since then, only two other Arab women have been elected to the Knesset: Nadia Hilou (2006, Knesset 17th), of the Labor party and Haneen Zuabi (2009, Knesset 18th and 2013, Knesset 19th), of BALAD (NDA, National Democratic Alliance), who was the first woman elected in an Arab party since the first Knesset elections in 1949.
- Arab women suffer from political underrepresentation in the municipal arena as well. In 1974, an Arab woman, Violette Khoury of Kafr Yasif, did serve as head of the local council, but women are usually marginalized from local politics and only few Arab women are elected as local council members. According to official figures provided by the Israeli Ministry of Interior, in each of the last two municipal election campaigns, held in October 2003 and November 2008, only six out of the 700 council members in Arab localities were women.

¹⁰ *Ha'aretz*, August 5, 2008.

¹¹ Yael Elon, "Changes in Third Sector Characteristics in the Passing Decade." *Newsletter – Israeli Center for Third Sector Research*, no. 24 (November 2006), pp. 8-9

- Arab women political activists and academics blamed the patriarchal nature of Arab society and the central role of the male-dominated *Hamulas* (clans) system in local politics as the major obstacles on the path to effective political representation for Arab women.¹²

¹² *Panorama*, July 25, 2008. *Kul al-Arab*, September 26, 2008. For a detailed discussion, see: Hanna Herzog and Taghreed Yahia-Younis, "Men's Bargaining with Patriarchy: The Case of Primaries within Hamulas in Palestinian Arab Communities in Israel." *Gender and Society*, vol. 21, no. 4 (August 2007), pp. 579-602.