

Article

Tradition, Challenges, and Integration: Arab Women in Israel's Local Government

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Abstract: Women's participation in local government is a key indicator of democratization and gender equality in modern societies. In the Arab society in Israel, this issue highlights tensions between tradition and modernity, communal values and individual aspirations, and social constraints and equal citizenship rights. This paper explores the enduring underrepresentation of Arab women in local authorities, the barriers hindering their political participation, and the social and cultural dynamics shaping their status, while comparing their representation to that of Jewish women. Despite substantial transformations in recent decades—including a significant rise in educational attainment, increased participation in the labor market, and processes of personal and social empowerment—these achievements have not translated into meaningful political representation. As of 2025, no Arab woman serves as a mayor of a local authority, and Arab women constitute only about 2% of the members of Arab local councils. This gap results from a combination of social, cultural, and institutional barriers, including deep-rooted patriarchal norms, the absence of affirmative action measures, a lack of community support mechanisms, and the impact of violence within Arab society on the public sphere. Despite these challenges, a gradual trend of change is evident, reflected in the growing number of Arab women serving as council members and in community initiatives aimed at promoting and strengthening their political involvement. The paper argues that expanding the representation of Arab women in local government is essential for advancing gender equality, empowering the Arab society in Israel, and contributing to Israeli society as a whole. It further outlines possible measures to increase the representation of Arab women in local government in Israel.

Keywords: Arab women, Local Government, Political Participation, Gender equality, Social and Cultural Barriers, Underrepresentation, Empowerment, Israel

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INTRODUCTION

The status of Arab women in Israel has undergone significant changes in recent decades, both within the broader Israeli society (Jews and Arabs) and within Arab society itself. In recent decades, Arab women in Israel have experienced substantial changes, the most notable of which is the increase in higher education attainment. In 2022, there were approximately 25,000 Arab women enrolled in undergraduate programs and around 600 pursuing doctoral degrees in Israel (Haddad Haj Yahya, 2022). Despite a steady increase in their representation, Arab women continue to be underrepresented across multiple sectors in Israel, including academia, medicine, the judiciary, government ministries, and the national political system.

In the Arab society in Israel, traditional perceptions see decision-making and policy formation as a male domain, where women are assumed to have little to contribute. These perceptions have historically excluded—and continue to exclude—women from such processes. This approach has created a significant barrier preventing Arab women from attaining key positions, leadership roles, and senior positions (Abu-Asba, 2018).

The participation of Arab women in local government in Israel represents a complex social and political issue, reflecting the intersections of gender relations, tradition, and modernization within the Arab society in Israel. Despite significant changes in the status of Arab women over recent decades, their representation in local government remains limited, and gender-related challenges continue to be a central issue in both public and academic discourse (Suaed & Shaeen - Trad, 2018). As of 2022, approximately 15 Jewish women served as heads of local authorities in Israel, while no Arab woman held the position of mayor in any local authority. However, there is a trend indicating a gradual change in the number of Arab women serving as council members in Arab local authorities in Israel. In the 2008 elections, six Arab women were elected to Arab local councils. Ten years later, in 2018, 25 Arab women served as full council members in Arab local authorities in Israel (Haddad Haj-Yahya, 2022).

In the 2024 local elections, the proportion of women serving as council members in Jewish local authorities increased from 24% to 27.5%, whereas the proportion of Arab women in Arab local councils remained extremely low, at approximately 2% of all council members, similar to the level recorded in previous elections (Finkelstein, 2024). The percentage of women serving as heads of Jewish local authorities in Israel also remained unchanged

in the 2024 local elections in Israel, and no change occurred in Arab local authorities, where no Arab woman was elected as mayor in any of the Arab municipalities (Salem & Piller, 2024).

Greater representation of women in Arab local authorities, and in Arab society generally, is likely to have a positive impact in many areas. Success in promoting women would enable them to realize their full potential and could contribute to changing traditional perceptions within Arab society. The more women succeed and assume leadership positions in local politics, they will be more able and have more power to influence and drive social and economic change. Women in leadership positions can encourage more women to enter the workforce, which in turn would strengthen the economy in the Arab society in Israel, reduce poverty, increase enrollment in higher education institutions, and contribute to prosperity in Israeli society as a whole.

PURPOSE

The current paper seeks to examine the representation of Arab women in local authorities in Israel, with a focus on their particularly low representation compared to Jewish women in the local political sphere. The study aims to identify and explain the main factors contributing to the limited representation of Arab women in local authorities, as well as to understand the social, cultural, and structural challenges they face within the Arab society in Israel, in comparison to those encountered by Jewish women. In addition, this paper attempts to suggest possible ways and strategies for increasing the representation of Arab women in local authorities, aiming to promote gender equality and broader political participation of Arab women in local government in Israel.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative research approach, relying primarily on an extensive review of existing research studies, published literature, and relevant online articles addressing the representation of Arab women in local authorities in Israel, sources addressing the broader status of Arab women within traditional Arab society in Israel, aspects of their education, social mobility, and integration into public and professional spheres. The source material includes both academic publications and a range of relevant institutional or media articles in English and Hebrew. This diverse source base enables a comprehensive overview and contextual understanding of the subject by synthesizing

findings and perspectives from multiple reputable sources.

TRADITIONAL ARAB SOCIETY AND THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S ROLES

The Arab society in Israel is a traditional society, one in which traditional values and norms continue to dictate gender roles, the visibility of women in the public sphere, and their participation in education, employment, and politics.

The Arab society in Israel is characterized by a traditional patriarchal structure, in which gender roles are clearly defined: women are primarily perceived as mothers and wives and are expected to adhere to strict codes of behavior. This perception leads to discrimination, subordination, and, in some cases, even violence against women. It is a society that protects male authority. The patriarchal structure of Arab society and family grants men greater authority and safeguards it. In a patriarchal society, men are expected to achieve more than women, to realize higher levels of self-actualization than women, and to be more dominant than women, particularly over women. According to Haj-Yahia (2005), many men in patriarchal societies hold sexist attitudes, negative views toward women, and unequal expectations for men and women within both society and the family (Haj-Yahia, 2005).

Although women constitute a proportion of the population similar to that of men, the status of Arab women remains lower in many areas, particularly among Muslim women, but also among Christian and Druze Arab women. They also do not receive adequate representation in various domains, both within broader Israeli society and within the Arab society in Israel (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018). Women experience economic disadvantage and discrimination. In a patriarchal society, the economic and occupational structure is unequal, leaving women with few options and limited access to “desirable” positions that are available to men. This situation creates and perpetuates women’s dependence on their partners (Haj-Yahia, 2005).

In the Arab society, the burden of childrearing falls primarily on women. The unequal division of labor in a patriarchal society places full responsibility for raising children on women yet does not provide them with economic compensation, let alone social recognition for fulfilling this essential role. Both Arab society and the state provide limited support to women in managing these responsibilities, both financially and through services such as childcare facilities. As a result, Arab women who enter the workforce - and earn less than men - also bear the

additional costs of childcare and other related expenses (Haj-Yahia, 2005).

The Arab society in Israel is undergoing a continuous transition from a traditional social structure to a modern society. In the traditional structure, a woman’s role is primarily defined in relation to the home and family, while the public sphere is largely perceived as the domain of men. This perception directly affects society’s willingness to accept women in leadership positions, particularly in local government.

In the Arab society in Israel, women have historically - and continue to be - excluded from decision-making and policy-shaping processes. This exclusion stems from a traditional perception that these domains are restricted to men and that women have little to contribute. Such perceptions have created a significant barrier preventing Arab women from attaining key positions, leadership roles, or senior positions (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018).

However, in recent decades, a trend of change is evident: the proportion of Arab women with higher education has been steadily increasing, reaching 20.3% in 2021, compared to only 9.8% among Arab men. Many women are entering liberal professions, teaching, management, and even key roles within their communities. Processes of modernization, increased exposure to media, and greater access to education contribute to this change, yet they have not yet resulted in substantive equality between women and men (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE ARAB SOCIETY IN ISRAEL

In recent years, significant changes have occurred in the status of women in the Arab society in Israel, particularly in two key areas: education and the willingness to join in the labor market. However, Substantial gaps continue to exist when compared to the Jewish population, and there are also differences between sub-communities (Muslims, Druze, Christians, Bedouins) and between geographic regions (the North, East Jerusalem, the Negev) (Gabaren, 2020).

There has been a marked change in the status of Arab women in Israel, as a result of broader societal changes in Israeli society and modernization, reflected in greater access to educational opportunities and the entry of Arab women into the labor market. Changes that have occurred over the years for women, around the world and in Israel, have also impacted Arab women in Israel, as evidenced by their advancement in higher education, increased opportunities for occupational

advancement, declining fertility rates, and adaptation to a modern era in which women have a place. These changes are not simple for Arab women living in a traditional, conservative society that does not grant women the same respected status as men (Abu-Asba, 2018).

Abu-Asba (2018) notes that the status of women in Arab society and the freedom given to them is a function of how open the group is to Western culture and its adoption of Western cultural norms. Christian Arabs tend to demonstrate a greater inclination toward Western culture than other social groups within the Arab population in Israel. Consequently, the freedom enjoyed by Christian women is greater than that of Muslim women.

CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN IN THE ARAB SOCIETY IN ISRAEL

Women in the Arab society in Israel confront a complex array of challenges stemming from the intersection of gender, cultural identity, religion, and, frequently, geographic location and socio-economic status. Although significant changes have occurred in recent decades, many of the underlying issues remain unresolved.

Social Challenges

Arab women in Israel are facing a range of social challenges originating from the structure of Arab society, tradition, gendered attitudes, and the position of Arabs in Israel as a minority group. Arab society is largely conservative, and women's status is often determined by traditional norms. Many women experience dual discrimination—both as a result of belonging to a minority population and their gender (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018).

Since Arab society is predominantly traditional, men occupy central roles in managing family and community affairs, while women are expected to adhere to these established norms. This is expressed through family dynamics, the division of responsibilities, and societal expectations that women remain primarily within the domestic and community spheres.

Challenges in Education and Employment

In recent years, the participation of Arab women in higher education has increased; nevertheless, higher education does not automatically result in quality participation in the workforce. Cultural barriers, a limited availability of suitable jobs near their home, and a lack of public transportation and support services for working mothers, such as childcare facilities, pose significant challenges (Abu-Asba, 2018).

Across all subgroups within the Arab society in Israel, improvements in the education of Arab women are evident, though not equally distributed. Christian women achieve higher results across all indicators, including matriculation exam scores, the proportion of women with higher education, employment rates, and occupational fields. Among Muslim women, who constitute the largest group, there is a trend of improvement in educational indicators, yet gaps between them and Muslim men remain significant. Druze women show increased rates of matriculation completion, but their occupational opportunities remain limited. Bedouin women exhibit the lowest achievements in both education and employment, despite improvements within this group; the majority of employed Bedouin women work in the field of education (Fuchs & Friedman Wilson, 2018).

Fuchs and Friedman Wilson (2018) identify several obstacles faced by Arab women in Israel, including low scores on standardized tests such as the Psychometric Entrance Test, posing obstacle to pursuing higher education in general. They also note that limited proficiency in Hebrew may restrict access to certain fields of study. This may help explain why Arab women are predominantly employed in the education sector; within education and healthcare roles in Arab localities in Israel, proficiency in Arabic is sufficient, whereas other fields may require higher proficiency in Hebrew.

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

Arab society as a whole suffers from insufficient infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, and high poverty rates. Women are at the lowest end of the scale, with a particularly low labor force participation rate—much lower than that of Jewish women (Abu-Asba, 2018). For many years, the employment rate among Arab women in Israel was very low, and their education level was lower compared to both Arab men in Israel and Jewish women. Over time, however, Arab women in Israel have made significant progress: more women now qualify for matriculation certificates, pursue diverse fields of study, and increasingly enroll in higher education and assume various roles in their communities (Khalaily et al., 2023; Abu-Asba, 2018). Nevertheless, the employment rate of Arab women remains low. Still, it may be expected that with the ongoing improvement in education, the coming years will bring an increase in their workforce participation, as Arab women with academic degrees are employed at higher rates than those without.

Arab women in Israel outperform Arab men in high school studies and are approaching the achievement levels of Jewish women. In addition, there is a steady increase in the number of Arab women pursuing higher education. In high school, Arab girls tend to choose science and engineering, fields associated with higher future earning potential. Unlike in the Jewish population, women constitute the majority in most science tracks in Arab high schools. In Israel. Nevertheless, in higher education, a significant majority of Arab women choose fields related to education, while relatively few pursue academic studies in science and engineering (Khalaily et al., 2023).

Although Arab women in Israel have experienced significant improvements in their level of education, their labor force participation remains considerably lower compared to that of Jewish women. Education is a key means of improving career opportunities and earning potential, yet cultural, institutional, and geographic barriers hinder Arab women from fully realizing their earning potential (Abu-Asba, 2018). The employment rate of Arab women of working age (25–66) has increased in recent years, reaching 46% in 2024. This figure remains substantially lower than the employment rate of Jewish women, which exceeds 80% (Elmo-Capital & Abgar, 2025). Despite the improvement in educational levels, the proportion of Arab women with academic degrees remains low—approximately 57% compared to 74% among Jewish women with academic degrees (Abu-Asba, 2018).

ARAB WOMEN IN THE LABOR MARKET IN ISRAEL

Arab women entering the workforce face a significant lack of supportive frameworks, such as counseling services and support organizations, which increases their reliance on family and community networks. They encounter a shortage of childcare facilities, limited access to public transportation, and a very constrained availability of employment services within the Arab sector. Furthermore, Arab women are frequently employed in low-paying positions and under exploitative working conditions, which further exacerbates socio-economic disparities.

In the Arab society, there is a significant degree of control over women's private sphere. Stereotypes persist regarding women who choose to pursue a career, limiting their ability to make independent choices. The prevailing norms in certain sectors and groups within the Arab society in Israel do not encourage female initiative, independence, or distinction. Deviation from conservative norms—

according to which women are expected to remain in the private domestic sphere, raise children, and care for the family and household—can result in social disapproval and pressure. The fear of social exclusion leads to conformity and a preference for conform to societal rules over the pursuit of independence and a professional career (Abu-Asba, 2018).

The Arab society in Israel is not homogeneous, and there are significant differences between different groups. A higher proportion of Christian and Druze Arab women attain higher education compared to Muslim women, and they experience considerably less familial supervision than women from very conservative communities, such as Bedouin women (Gabaren, 2020). A large percentage of Arab women pursue careers in education. However, the labor market in this field is saturated, limiting job opportunities, and wages are relatively low (Fuchs & Friedman Wilson, 2018). The primary factor leading women to enter this profession is its relative convenience and the reduced work-family conflict. Women can end their workday in the early afternoon, return home, and care for their children. The proximity of the workplace to home also influences the choice of Arab women in Israel to work in the education sector (Abu-Asba, 2018).

Obstacles and Challenges Faced by Arab Women in the Israeli Labor Marke

A key barrier for Arab women seeking to enter the Israeli labor market is language, specifically limited proficiency in Hebrew. Employment often requires passing screening tests, yet Arab candidates participate in these tests at lower rates than their Jewish counterparts, primarily due to difficulties in expressing themselves and communicating effectively in Hebrew. Additional barriers include low Psychometric Entrance Test scores, choosing fields of study that are not in high demand, limited opportunities in technological and scientific professions, and a lack of diverse employment opportunities in Arab municipalities. There is also an oversupply of Arab women with academic qualifications in education, resulting in a supply that exceeds demand (Fuchs & Friedman Wilson, 2018). Age is also a factor influencing the employment rate of Arab women in Israel. According to Abu-Asba (2018), data indicate a negative correlation between age and labor market participation: with increasing age, participation decreases, a pattern that is particularly pronounced among Arab women compared to Jewish women. With increasing age and marriage—especially among married women with young children—the tendency to leave the workforce becomes more pronounced.

REPRESENTATION OF ARAB WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Political Participation and Leadership: Arab women are largely excluded from the management of institutions and local governance, and they are rarely found in key decision-making positions. Traditionally, leadership and governance have been perceived as domains reserved for men (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018). Arab women are almost completely absent from public leadership roles, municipal councils, and community forums. Even when Arab women obtain academic degrees, their representation in leadership positions and social institutions remains low.

Low Representation of Arab Women in Local Authorities

An examination of Arab women's representation in local government within Arab society reveals a particularly grim picture. Historically, Arab society in Israel has excluded, and continues to exclude, women from decision-making processes and policy formation, based on the traditional perception that governance is a male domain and women are perceived as having nothing to contribute. This perception has acted as a barrier preventing Arab women from attaining key positions, leadership roles, or senior appointments (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018).

The political representation of Arab women in local authorities in Israel remains very low, both in comparison to Jewish women and relative to their proportion in the population. Following the 2024 local elections, there was a slight increase in the number of female council members in Arab municipalities in Israel. In these elections, 19 Arab women were elected as council members across 12 Arab local authorities, indicating some improvement in the representation of Arab women compared to previous elections. In 2013, only six women were elected to Arab local councils, and in 2018, 17 Arab women were elected to Arab local councils in Israel. Despite this gradual increase, representation remains low compared to that of Jewish women in local councils in Israel, whose representation, though still unequal, has risen significantly in recent years (Salem & Piller, 2024).

As of 2025, no Arab woman has been elected to head a local authority in Israel. The only time an Arab woman held the position of head of an Arab local authority was in the 1970s, when Violet Khoury served as the head of the local council in Kafr Yasif. In 2008, six Arab women served as council members, and by 2018 the number had risen to 25; however, representation remains very low (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018).

The results of the 2024 local elections in Israel present a concerning picture of the underrepresentation of women in Arab local authorities in Israel. According to data from the Israel Democracy Institute (Salem & Piller, 2024), the representation of Arab women remains low both in relation to their proportion in the population and compared to Jewish women. Across all Arab local authorities in Israel, Arab women will serve as council members in only 12 municipalities, with Nazareth leading the way with four female council members.

A particularly concerning finding is that seven Arab municipalities in Israel, which had a single female council member in the previous term, were left entirely without women following the 2024 elections. This represents a significant setback, reflecting the difficulty of establishing a stable female presence in Arab local governance in Israel. The absence of affirmative policies, such as gender quotas, combined with traditional conservatism, constitutes a major barrier for Arab women (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018). In most Arab local authorities in Israel, women do not hold key positions, and the path to senior roles remains largely blocked for many of them (Salem & Piller, 2024).

No Women Heading Local Authorities

In recent decades, the level of higher education among Arab women in Israel has increased, with more and more women obtaining academic degrees. However, their representation in local government has hardly changed and remains at very low levels (Haj Yahya, 2022). Currently, no Arab woman serves as the head of a local authority in Israel. In contrast, Jewish women in Israel have achieved change in local politics. Following the 2024 local elections, 14 Jewish women hold the position of head of a local authority in Israel, serving as mayors (Sokol, 2024). As noted, one of the most striking findings is that no female candidate has been elected as the head of an Arab local authority. Nevertheless, encouraging signs can be observed: five female candidates who led their party lists were elected to councils in five localities in northern Israel, offering hope for future change (Salem & Piller, 2024).

Arab Women Breaking into Traditionally Male-Dominated Fields

Arab women are breaking new ground into fields traditionally dominated by men. They are entering the legal profession, academia, local politics, and even the religious Islamic movement. These achievements often encounter resistance and are sometimes expressed through cautious or partial measures that resemble protective policies rather

than full equality. Nevertheless, women within these institutions view such steps as important preparatory work toward deeper inclusion (Abu-Asba, 2018).

Main Reasons for the Low Representation of Arab Women in Local Councils in Israel

The low representation of Arab women in local councils in Israel is the result of deep social, cultural, structural, and political barriers, some of which are unique and distinct from those affecting other groups in Israeli society.

Key Challenges Facing Arab Women in Local Governance

Key Challenges Facing Arab Women in Local Governance include

Conservative social and cultural norms - traditional perceptions of gender roles persist within Arab society. Leadership is widely regarded as a male domain, and many women who wish to run for local council elections face a lack of support from their families or communities (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018; Salem & Piller, 2024).

Lack of Support – Arab society is patriarchal and male-dominated. If a man allows his wife to run for elections, he may face social condemnation, as if there is no man in the family and the woman is stepping forward. Consequently, men often not only fail to encourage women to run for local council elections but may actively oppose it (Zuabi, 2023).

Gender Discrimination - Women in Arab society in Israel continue to face gender discrimination, which affects many aspects of social life. Arab society is traditional, with clearly defined roles for men and women and a degree of segregation between the genders. Women's traditional role is to stay at home and care for the family rather than participate in public life. This cultural framework limits women's ability to engage in political and community activities and prevents many from having the opportunity to become involved in political participation (Abu Dabai Saadi, 2023).

Legislative Gaps and Absence of Affirmative Action – Unlike other countries, Israel does not have legislation mandating female representation in political parties or on electoral lists for municipal or national elections. This lack of legal support makes it more difficult to promote Arab women in politics (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018).

Educational and Employment Gaps - Despite the increase in the educational level of Arab women in Israel and the proportion of Arab women with

academic degrees, their participation in politics and the labor market in Israel remains limited, particularly in rural areas in Israel (Abu-Asba, 2018).

Violence, Crime, and Masculinity - Another factor contributing to the low representation of women in local politics is the prevalence of violence and crime. Electoral violence, along with the broader increase in violence within Arab society in Israel, is one of the reasons women refrain from running for office (Zuabi, 2023). In recent years, criminal organizations in Arab communities have begun to view local councils and public funds as sources of income. This creates a violent and dangerous environment, which acts as a deterrent for many women who fear entering a political arena filled with real threats and risks (Abu Dabai Saadi, 2023). Nevertheless, masculinity remains the primary factor. Local election lists are often organized according to family affiliations and do not take women into account (Zuabi, 2023).

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND CHANGES

Women in Local Government in Israel

The representation of women in politics is one of the most extensively researched topics in political science literature. The basic assumption among academic scholars is that a meaningful presence of women in political arenas is of considerable significance - it is essential for a fair and inclusive society and for promoting the perception of women as equal citizens. Furthermore, since women constitute approximately half of the population, it is only appropriate that their voices be equally represented in decision-making processes (Kenig, 2025).

There are several reasons for the importance of increasing the representation of women in leadership positions. First and foremost, democracy, as a representative system of government, is founded on the principle of adequate representation of the electorate. Since women constitute approximately half of the population, it is both natural and desirable that their proportion among elected officials correspond to their share in society. A second reason is that the presence of women in leadership positions increases the likelihood of advancing interests that are particularly important to women, given their familiarity with the preferences of female constituents. In addition, a rise in the proportion of women in politics may contribute to gender equality in society, as women in leadership positions may serve as role models for other women and girls in

both personal and public domains in which barriers to women's success persist. (Yakir et al., 2024). The participation of women in local government is both essential and significant for improving quality of life within local communities and for promoting democracy and equality. Research indicates that women's participation in local government carries distinct advantages and that efficiency improves when they hold decision-making, leadership, or public representative roles (Abu Dabai Saadi, 2023). The participation of women in local government contributes to the advancement of women's status and to the creation of a more diverse and inclusive society. Female presence in the local arena strengthens the values of democracy and gender equality and enhances the quality of services provided to citizens. Women in leadership positions bring a particular sensitivity to the needs of groups that have historically been underrepresented, including women, children, adolescents, and the elderly. Integrating both female and male perspectives in local governance promotes professional conduct, reduces corruption, and supports a fairer allocation of budgets, and advances community welfare and overall quality of life. Promoting women's political participation cannot rely solely on the efforts of women or women's organizations. It is a systemic need that requires commitment from both local and central government, as well as from legislative authorities. Female representation should be encouraged through legislation that fosters collaboration, educational programs that promote gender equality, and training for women in management and leadership positions. The media also play a crucial role – they should highlight positive role models of women leaders. This issue should be part of public discourse and included on the policy agenda, with a clear demand for decision-makers to act to advance genuine female partnership in local governance (Abu Dabai Saadi, 2023).

Women in Local Government in Israel: Jewish Society vs. Arab Society

The differences in the representation of women in the Jewish sector compared to the Arab and Haredi sectors in local government in Israel are significant and reflect deep gaps stemming from cultural, social, and economic characteristics.

Representation of Women in Local Government in Israel - The Jewish Sector

In recent years, the representation of women in local councils in Israel, including in the role of mayor, has increased, but it remains low. Female representation is higher in Jewish municipalities and rises with the socio-economic ranking of the local authority. In the

elections held in 2018, women accounted for only about 6% of those elected as mayors. In the elections held in February 2024, the proportion of female candidates was approximately 10% (Yakir et al., 2024). In 2024, within the Jewish sector, the share of women council members ranged from 24% to 27%, and the proportion of Jewish women among mayoral candidates was about 9%–17%. However, in practice, after the 2024 elections, only 6% of mayors were women (Yakir et al., 2024).

Yakir et al. (2024) examined the representation of women in political leadership positions at the local level, as reflected in four election cycles, including the local elections in Israel in 2018. They found that, from a historical perspective, the proportion of Jewish women serving as mayors in Israel was extremely low—almost negligible—throughout most decades. Up until the year 2000, only 17 women in total had served as mayors, most of them in local and regional councils. In other words, during the first five decades of the state's existence, the share of women among those elected as heads of local authorities was less than 1%.

The findings of Yakir et al. (2024) indicated that the proportion of women elected as mayors in the first three election cycles of the 21st century averaged 2.5%, and in the 2018 elections it was close to 6%. Although the share of women elected has increased, it remains low compared to Western democracies. The study also found that the rise in the proportion of women elected occurred alongside an increase in the number of women running for mayor. However, it is worth noting that in all election cycles, the share of female candidates was lower than the share of women actually elected, indicating that women's chances of success are lower than those of men. Yakir et al. (2024) also found that the proportion of women among mayoral candidates in Arab local authorities during the period they examined was zero. In comparison, the results in Jewish local authorities were higher, at 40%–50%, but still low by international standards. They also noticed that in economically strong municipalities, the proportion of women among mayoral candidates and elected officials was higher. In other words, the share of women among both candidates and elected representatives increases with the socio-economic level of the locality. A possible explanation is that municipalities with a low socio-economic status are almost entirely Arab and Haredi authorities. In these municipalities, the proportion of women among council candidates is very low compared to Jewish local authorities.

Another interesting finding from the study by Yakir et al. (2024) is that in Jewish local authorities, the proportion of women elected to councils decreases as city size increases. In contrast, in Arab local

authorities, the share of women elected to councils is higher in larger cities. This may be explained by the fact that larger and more centrally located cities are likely more heterogeneous and less conservative than smaller towns and villages in Arab society. As a result, residents of larger Arab and mixed cities are somewhat more inclined to vote for female candidates, and Arab women are also more likely to run for office in these larger and more mixed cities.

CHANGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Changes in the Status of Women in the Arab Society in Israel

Significant changes have occurred in the status of Arab women in Israel as a result of broader societal changes in the country, as well as modernization, reflected in the expansion of education among Arab women and their participation in the labor market. These processes have enabled Arab women to engage with the world beyond the home, while also bringing the world into their homes through the media and the Internet. Arab women in Israel have also been influenced by changes affecting women worldwide and within Israel. As a result, progress in the status of Arab women can be observed in higher education, career advancement, having fewer children, and a shift from traditional norms in Arab society toward adaptation to modern times, which also gives women a place. These changes are not easy, particularly in a traditional society with conservative norms, where women do not hold a prominent role compared to men (Abu-Asba, 2018). Thousands of Arab women are gradually shifting social norms, challenging traditional roles through small, everyday decisions: continuing education, entering politics, pursuing careers, and demanding autonomy in their personal lives. These quiet acts are gradually transforming communal expectations (Salaime, 2018).

Diverse paths to empowerment

Unlike Western feminist trajectories, many Arab women take non-linear routes, starting education or work at different life stages, often after marriage or motherhood. This emphasizes that progress is taking uniquely local forms - not always aligning with Western models (Salaime, 2018). These grassroots developments accumulate over time to create real societal impact. And yet, despite all these changes, there has been no significant improvement in women's representation in politics.

MEASURES FOR INCREASING THE REPRESENTATION OF ARAB WOMEN IN ARAB LOCAL COUNCILS IN ISRAEL

Promoting the representation of women in local government and in Arab society has broad ethical and social implications. It advances fundamental democratic and humanistic values such as equality, pluralism, and justice, while challenging the traditional value system within Arab society. Success in this area would enable Arab women to realize their personal and community potential, particularly in social and economic domains. Currently, only about 40% of Arab women are employed. Increasing women's participation in leadership roles would encourage their integration into the workforce, improve the economic status of the Arab society, reduce poverty, promote education and higher learning, and, in the long term, contribute to the prosperity of Israeli society as a whole.

There are several possible ways to improve the representation of women in Israel in general, and of Arab women in local councils in particular. One approach is *legislative reform* that would help promote women and increase their representation in local government.

Another approach is to provide *financial incentives* to women to run for mayoral positions in local authorities. Candidates for mayor receive funding if they achieve a certain level of voter support. To help promote women, the threshold for receiving funding could be lowered for female candidates, enabling them to access financial support and run for office. This mechanism can advance women's participation and encourage those who may fear they have little chance of being elected to submit their candidacy. Financial incentives can particularly motivate women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for whom economic considerations are significant (Tahon Ashkenazi & Shapira, 2023).

Women's representation in local councils can also be promoted and encouraged through *awareness-raising* efforts. There are NGOs and civil society organizations whose goal is to encourage women to run in local elections, raise awareness, and support female candidates. For example, ahead of the 2018 local elections in Israel, several civil and women's rights organizations operating within Arab society formed a coalition called "*Your Voice is Power*" (صوتك قوة) to advocate for women's political representation in Arab local authorities. This initiative is based on the principle that political representation is a fundamental right for every citizen in a democratic society striving for equality and social justice. It aims to ensure genuine participation of women in public, political, and economic life, appropriate representation in political

institutions, and legislation that guarantees women's representation (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018). For example, this coalition worked to raise awareness by organizing and mobilizing groups of women and young women in Arab localities in Israel, bringing the issue of women's representation to the forefront of the election agenda.

Professional training and mentoring is another effective approach. By providing women who wish to run in elections with professional and moral guidance, they can be encouraged, supported, and assisted in presenting their candidacy.

Another way to promote women's representation is through *the media*. Highlighting the issue in traditional media and on social media can help shape public discourse and influence societal attitudes.

Raising awareness among Arab women is another way to promote and encourage them to run in local elections. For example, prior to the 2018 local elections in Israel, the coalition worked to increase awareness among Arab women about their right to run in local elections, aiming to double the number of female candidates on party and municipal lists, with the goal of achieving women's representation of 25–30% (Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018).

Women are an integral part of society and, therefore, should receive proper representation and the opportunity to serve the community. It is important to enable as many women as possible to participate in municipal affairs - not only to vote freely but also to run for office and be elected to local authorities, which are still characterized by patriarchal and conservative patterns.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present paper indicate that the status of Arab women in Israel has undergone significant changes in recent decades, particularly in the field of education.

However, these changes have not sufficiently translated into increased political representation in local authorities. The rise in the number of Arab female students in higher education, as well as the proportion of women pursuing advanced studies (Haddad Haj-Yahya, 2022), reflects a trend of empowerment and the strengthening of Arab women's potential. Nevertheless, these findings contrast with the political reality, where the share of Arab women in leadership positions remains extremely low; as of 2024, no Arab woman has been elected to head a local authority (Salem & Piller, 2024).

One of the main reasons for this gap lies in traditional social perceptions within the Arab society, which view leadership as an inherently male

domain and exclude women from decision-making processes (Abu-Asba, 2018; Suaed & Shaeen – Trad, 2018). The patriarchal structure, as noted by Haj-Yahia (2005), reinforces gender-based role divisions and limits women's presence in the public sphere. This is reinforced by the limited support provided by the state to Arab women - both economically (for example the lack of supportive frameworks for working mothers) and structurally (for example, the absence of legislation for affirmative action). This situation creates a self-reinforcing cycle, where even educated and skilled women struggle to translate their achievements into political representation. It is evident that internal gaps also exist within Arab society. Studies show that Christian and Druze women enjoy greater freedom of action, often due to a stronger openness to adopting Western values (Abu-Asba, 2018). In contrast, Muslim and Bedouin women encounter more significant barriers in both education and employment (Fuchs & Friedman Wilson, 2018). This fact highlights the understanding that Arab society in Israel is not a homogeneous group, and that cultural, geographical, and religious differences between its sub-groups must be taken into account.

The data on women's representation in local government presents a complex picture: on the one hand, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Arab women council members, from only six in 2008 to 25 in 2018, and 19 elected in 2024 (Haddad Haj-Yahya, 2022; Salem & Piller, 2024). On the other hand, their share in Arab local councils amounts to only about 2%, a figure that points to severe underrepresentation, especially when compared to Jewish women, who have held many more positions and have even been elected as heads of local authorities (Finkelstein, 2024; Sokol, 2024). The fact that no Arab woman currently serves as the head of a local authority symbolizes the persistence of structural inequality.

These findings highlight the fact that the barriers do not stem solely from a lack of education or willingness to integrate, but rather from a combination of cultural, social, and institutional factors. A patriarchal culture, the absence of modern legislation, both explicit and implicit gender discrimination, as well as a lack of institutional support - all contribute to the continuation of these gaps (Zuabi, 2023; Abu Dabai Saadi, 2023).

In conclusion, the findings of this paper indicate that although significant achievements have been made in the academic sphere and in the growing proportion of educated Arab women, in the local political arena they still face substantial barriers. A combination of institutional strategies (such as promoting affirmative action legislation), alongside gradual social change (such as encouraging gender

discourse within Arab society), is required in order to break the cycle and establish more equitable representation for Arab women in local government in Israel.

CONCLUSION

The status of Arab women in Israel reflects a complex reality: while significant progress has been made in higher education, employment, and personal empowerment, their political representation at the local level remains extremely limited. Despite an increase in the number of Arab women pursuing academic studies and professional careers (Haddad Haj-Yahya, 2022), these achievements are hardly reflected in the public sphere. As of 2025, no Arab woman serves as a mayor in Israel, and women make up only about 2% of local council members in Arab municipalities (Salem & Piller, 2024). The main barriers stem from deep-rooted patriarchal structures, rigid cultural norms, and institutional obstacles, including the absence of affirmative action policies (Haj-Yahia, 2005; Abu-Asba, 2018).

Nevertheless, gradual change is evident. The number of Arab women elected to councils has increased over the past decade, indicating a limited but meaningful overcoming of these barriers (Haddad Haj-Yahya, 2022; Salem & Piller, 2024). Moreover, voices from within Arab society, particularly among younger and educated women, increasingly call for greater political participation (Zuabi, 2023). Alongside these challenges, several positive developments highlight the progress Arab women have made in recent decades. These include:

- Advancement in education: The number of Arab female students has shown a consistent increase, and Arab women now constitute a majority among Arab undergraduate students.
- Integration into the labor market: The labor force participation rate of Arab women has risen from 20% to 27.3% over the past decade.
- Enhanced public visibility: An increasing number of women are engaged in public activity, particularly in the fields of education, medicine, and local councils, albeit not yet in senior leadership positions.

Arab women in Israel thus stand at a crossroads between tradition and modernity. Although personal and professional achievements are evident, the path toward full gender equality in local politics remains long and requires sustained efforts at social, institutional, and community levels.

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