

Palestinian Women in the Israeli Labor Market

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Women's employment is a subject of great interest around the world, due to the important influence of work on the status of women as individuals, and on women as a segment of society. Furthermore, many regard salaried work not only as providing personal benefit to each working woman, by raising her social status, developing her human capacities, and contributing to her personal and economic independence, but also as a lever for the advancement of the status of women as a marginalized group that faces discrimination in the enjoyment of social, economic and political rights.

Many researchers, male and female, as well as local and international women's organizations, have engaged in the subject of women's employment, and an extensive body of research has been produced on the various aspects of the issue. Feminist research in this field has been characterized by three main aspects, through which criticism has been leveled at the masculine research tools and hypotheses employed. The first aspect has concentrated on the appeal by feminists against the term "labor," arguing that the official statistics systematically disregard household tasks and the upbringing and care of children, which are tasks that women continue to carry out according to the traditional division of functions by gender, thereby undervaluing the contribution made by women to the general economy. They also point to the consequences of this marginalization, in terms of the entrenchment of the "inferior" status of women in society. (Kuttab, 2007) Adherents of the second aspect concentrate their critique on the fact that the official statistics do not include work in the informal sector, such as agriculture, family businesses, etc. The evidence indicates that women are over-represented in this sector in most regions of the world, and particularly in developing countries. (Sethuraman, 2000) As a result, a large percentage of working women are omitted from the official statistics. (Kuttab, 2008) The third aspect is associated more with research on women and poverty, i.e. the effect of using the unit of the family—rather than the individual—to measure poverty rates in societies on obscuring the true number of vulnerable women. (Abdo, 2006: 8)

The subject of women and labor has also received a great deal of attention from policy-makers, due to the fact that it yields additional indications about society as a whole: the rate of women's participation in the labor force is an indicator of progress in society and its capacity to exploit its human resources in pursuit of economic progress. Thus governments around the world first strive to shed light on the factors that may impede the entry of women into the labor force, and then draw up policies, enacting laws and developing programs, in an attempt to overcome these obstacles and ensure equality between women and men in employment opportunities, labor rights, and eliminate gender-based discrimination against them.

Palestinian women in Israel and participation in the labor market

In recent years the subject of labor and Palestinian women has generated special interest; there is a growing attention to the subject among researchers and academics, as well as activists in civil society organizations working on women's and feminist issues, and among Arab politicians. It has also been addressed on occasion by policy makers.

Interest in the subject has grown alongside the increase in research into the socioeconomic conditions of Palestinians in Israel, which can be divided—according to Palestinian researcher Raja Khalidi (2008)—into two broad categories. The first category represents “liberal neo-Zionism,” the starting point of which is the fairness of the political regime in the State of Israel and the presupposition that the rights of non-Jews in the Jewish State are equal rights. Researchers in this category believe that market management and a flexible and timely labor policy, sponsored by the state, can in some way correct the multiple distortions created by forces unrelated to the market. The second category, which is referred to as “non-Zionist political economy,” was developed in the 1980s. It is based on different ideologies that share a comprehensive perspective on the role of Jewish State-building policies before and after 1948. These policies included, among other things, the confiscation of land, separation and marginalization of the Palestinian minority, which placed obstacles in the way of its development. (Khalidi, 2008: 29)

Some researchers close ideologically to the first category use the low rate of labor force participation among Palestinian women as one explanation for the inferior socioeconomic status of Palestinians. This group attributes the low rate of participation among Palestinian women to cultural reasons related to the nature of Palestinian society and of relations between the genders within it. (Semyonov, Lewin-Epstein Brahm, 1999) The second category views the economic situation of Palestinians in Israel as deriving from its political reality, and argues that the economic reality of the Palestinians accurately mirrors governmental policies towards the Palestinian minority. (Shihadeh, 2006) Thus researchers close to this category ideologically regard the low rate of labor market participation among Palestinian women as a product of the relations of the Jewish State to the Palestinian minority and its policies toward it. As a feminist concerned with this issue, I believe that the study and analysis of the economic activity of Palestinian women in Israel in general, and their participation in the labor market in particular may, in addition to being a reflection of the relationship of the Jewish State to the Palestinian minority, contribute to deepening our understanding of the connection between the policies of the Jewish State and the evolving gender relations and the perpetuation of the “inferior” status of women within Palestinian society.

This paper attempts to supply the reader with information on the subject of the employment of Palestinian women in Israel, relying on the available data. It further seeks to investigate the various explanations that have been offered for the low rate at which Palestinian women in Israel participate in the labor market. It should be noted that the following discussion does not address the employment of women in the informal sector, due to the lack of the relevant statistics in Israel.

Information concerning the participation of Palestinian women in the labor market (and additional relevant characteristics, such as age group, occupation, full/part-time work, years of schooling, and cultural background) has primarily been drawn from the database of the Central Bureau of Statistics. (CBS) In addition, in recent years, more precisely in 2004 and 2007, the Rikaz Databank—supported by the Galilee Society: The Arab National Society for Health Research and Services, in cooperation with other organizations (Mada al-Carmel in 2004 and Ahali in 2007)—conducted a

socioeconomic survey of Palestinian citizens of Israel. The survey was the first of its kind in terms of the comprehensiveness of its data, and for the first time, it included data from the unrecognized villages in the Naqab (Negev). In addition, the Galilee Society's survey provides gender-based labor force characteristics. This approach contrasts with that provided by the CBS, which presents data on Palestinians in general, referring to the percentages that Palestinian men make up of the total labor force, without indicating the percentage of women in its data.

The rate of labor force participation among Palestinian women citizens of the State of Israel is considered to be extremely low. The data indicates that over the past 10 years, this rate has not risen above 23%—the rate in 2004 (The Galilee Society, 2005)—while the rate among Jewish women stood at over 57% in 2007. (Labor Force Survey, 2007)

The rate of labor force participation among Palestinian women citizens of the State of Israel is considered low even in comparison with the Arab world, where it stands at an average of 33.3%, climbing as high as 63.1% in some states (such as Mauritania), and reaching 41.9% in Morocco. It is even lower than the rate of women's labor force participation in Saudi Arabia and Oman, where the rates are 29% and 27% respectively, two states that are regarded as most unprogressive in the field of women's labor. (UNDP, 2005)

Employment characteristics among Palestinian women in Israel

This section examines the main characteristics of salaried work done by women in terms of participation in the labor market,¹ age group, and years of schooling.

According to the survey conducted by the Galilee Society in 2007, the proportion of Palestinian women citizens in the State of Israel who are outside the labor force² stands at close to 81%, while the percentage engaged in the labor force reaches 18.9% (The Galilee Society, 2008), but varies with age group, education, place of residence and other characteristics.

The rate of participation is lowest in the south, where it stands at just 11.4%, rising to 19% in the north, and 23% in the center. Approximately 58% of working Palestinian women are engaged in full-time employment. The survey reveals that 73% of women pursue part-time work³ due to external factors such as the lack of full-time positions, because the total number of hours involved in their position is fewer than 35 hours per week, or due to the unavailability of additional employment. (The Galilee Society, 2008)

¹ The labor force includes all individuals in the 15 to 64 age group, to whom the concepts of employment and unemployment apply. (The Galilee Society, 2008)

² "Outside the labor force" means all individuals who are of working age but do not work and are not seeking employment, whether because they do not wish to work—because they are not in need of the financial returns it brings—or for other reasons. (The Galilee Society, 2008)

³ Part-time workers includes all individuals to whom the concept of employment applies, and who work irregularly, or who work fewer than full hours—for one reason or another—but who wish to raise this number.

Over 50% of working Palestinian women fall within the 25 to 44 age group (31.3% are aged between the ages of 25 and 34; 21.9% are aged between 35 and 44). There is a sharp decline in the rate of employment among women in the 55+ age group, which stands at just 1.3%. Distance to the workplace for a majority of women, with slight regional variations, ranges between 0 km and 9 km. The percentage of married women in the labor force is not much lower than the rate among single women (at 18.7% and 21.1% respectively). However, only 18.6% of working women are married and have children. (Manna, 2008)

The number of years of schooling is a lever for entry into the labor market, and there is a positive correlation between the number of years spent in schooling by Palestinian women and their participation in the labor force. Hence in 2007, 68.8% of Palestinian women with academic degree (who have completed 16+ years of schooling) were engaged in the labor force. However, this figure was still lower than the figure for Arab men academics (84.7%) and Jewish women academics (79.2%). (Balikov, 2007) Similarly, the relatively low rate of participation of Palestinian women who have completed between 13 and 15 years of schooling is striking when compared to Jewish women: in 2007, 37.3% of Palestinian women from this group were engaged in the labor market, while the percentage among Jewish women stood at 65.9%. (Balikov, 2007)

Awad (2007) attributes unemployment among Palestinian women academics to several causes, including: systematic discrimination and exclusion by the government; failed policies that fall short of exploiting the human resources and energies of this group; the absence of employment offices⁴ competent in providing workplaces to Arab academics, men and women; the unsuitability of the vocational training subjects to the demands of the labor market; and the inadequate infrastructure, which lacks a regular transportation network. In addition, there is an acute shortage of care facilities and nurseries for children in Palestinian communities in Israel. (Awad, 2007)

Government is a major employer of women, in particular women academics, with women accounting for 65% of employees in the various governmental offices and ministries. However, the same does not hold true for Palestinian women, who represent just 3% of employees of government institutions, most of whom live in the north and Haifa. The Ministry of Health is the chief employer of Palestinian women, with close to 82% of those employed in government institutions working for the ministry. However, some ministries (such as the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of National infrastructures, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Ministry of Construction and Housing) do not employ a single Palestinian woman. (Haidar, 2003)

Discrimination against Palestinian women is not confined to public employment, but also applies to wages. A survey conducted by the Adva Center on the 50 towns and villages with the lowest wage levels among women, reveals that 48 of these 50 towns

⁴ The main function of an employment office is to give consultation regarding work, provide information and advice about vocational training courses, and offer adult education, under the supervision of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor.

and villages are Palestinian villages. (Etkin, 2004) Statistics published by the CBS further demonstrate that in 2007 there was a clear disparity between the wages earned by Palestinian women and Jewish women: the average monthly wages of Palestinian women stood at NIS 4350, compared with NIS 6112 among Jewish women. Palestinian women also work fewer hours per week than Jewish women, at less than 32.4 hours versus 35.7 hours, and Jewish women receive a higher hourly wage than Palestinians women, at NIS 41.5 per hour compared with NIS 32.3. (Wage Survey, 2007)

In 2007, while the general rate of unemployment was 7.3%, and the rate among Jewish women 7.9%, 13.5% of Palestinian women in Israel were unemployed. The percentage was significantly higher in the south, where it rose to 23.1%. A survey carried out by the Galilee Society indicates that over 50% of unemployed women cease working as a result of external factors, such as the seasonal nature of their work, dismissal for various reasons, or the expiration of an employment contract. Approximately only 10% stopped working for personal reasons, such as marriage, or in order to devote their time to household duties. (The Galilee Society, 2008) All of the above indicates that structural, political factors (more than social factors) are impeding the employment of Palestinian women. This conclusion has been confirmed by research conducted by Dr. Yousef Jabareen at the Technion, in which he suggests that 43% of unemployed Arab women would be willing to enter the labor market were the opportunity available to them. (*Haaretz*, June 8, 2009)

As stated above, a multitude of reasons and explanations have been offered concerning this subject. However, the majority of Israeli research, published by researchers working in Israeli academic institutions (e.g., Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov, 1992; Semyonov et al., 1999), and issued periodically by official Israeli institutions (such as the Bank of Israel, and various relevant government departments),⁵ ascribes the low rate of participation among Palestinian women in Israel in the labor market to cultural reasons and to the traditional structure of Palestinian society. Studies carried out by Arab and Palestinian researchers—as well as reports issued by Palestinian feminist organizations (Kuttab, 2002; Awad, 2006; Shihadeh, 2006; Hazzan, 2005; *Kayan*, 2007)—specify that, in addition to social obstacles, there are also political and structural obstacles related to state racism that contribute to this phenomenon.

The culturally essentialist factors used to explain the phenomenon of the low rate of labor force participation among Palestinian women in Israel can be summarized by asserting that Palestinian society in Israel is a traditional, patriarchal society in which social functions are divided according to gender along traditional lines. Thus men take responsibility for providing for the family, while women undertake domestic tasks, and bear and care for children. These factors do play a role in explaining this phenomenon; however, many Palestinian and Arab researchers (as well as feminist activist interested in the subject) believe that there are other reasons pertaining to state racism (racism that is embodied, *inter alia*, in policies of discrimination towards

⁵ See item “The Labor Market” in the report issued by the Bank of Israel for the year 2008. Available at <http://www.bankisrael.gov.il/deptdata/mekhar/doch/08/heb/doch08h.thm>.

the Palestinian minority) that underpin the phenomenon, and sometimes constitute an obstacle to change in the status of Palestinian women, and reinforce their “inferior” status.

For example, while the aforementioned findings suggest that marriage does not present an obstacle to the entry of Palestinian women into the labor market, 75% of respondents surveyed by Hunaida Ghanem (2005) for the association Women Against Violence confirmed that the existence of childcare facilities strongly affected the entry of mothers into the labor market. These findings demonstrate that the lack of daily childcare facilities can prove a real obstacle to the engagement of women in the labor market. Data published by the Ministry of Social Affairs reveals that of the 1,600 nurseries that provide daily care to children under three years of age that operate in Israel with financial support from the public sector, just 25 operate in Palestinian communities. (Boulus, 2006) Thus, parallel to the shift in attitudes towards women’s employment being witnessed within Palestinian society (the findings of the Democracy Index of 2009, to be published by the Israeli Institute of Democracy suggest that only 24% of Arab respondents are opposed to women going out to work), state racism and the state’s policies of discrimination against Palestinian citizens create real obstacles to the entry of Palestinian mothers into the labor market.

The inadequate nature of the transportation system both to and from Arab communities acts as an additional hurdle to women. According to the results of research conducted in 2007 by *Kayan* on the public transport system in Arab communities, the poor state of the public transport system in Palestinian communities, both in terms of its availability and frequency, contributes to the exclusion of Palestinian society in general, and Palestinian women in particular. It further infringes on the basic social and economic rights of Palestinian women, acting as a real barrier to their entry into the labor market (*Kayan*, 2007).

The 2005 NGO Alternative Pre-Sessional Report on Israel’s Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which brought together the Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel, offers other reasons for the low rate of participation in the labor market among Palestinian women.

The drafters of the report regard the shortage of training programs appropriate for Palestinian women citizens of Israel as another stumbling block to their entry into the labor market. According to the report, most vocational schools that operate in Palestinian villages provide traditional vocational training to women instead of training in technological fields. Furthermore, the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor runs vocational training programs for the unemployed; however, it does not offer sufficient training courses for Palestinian women, who accounted for 6% of the participants of the ministry’s training courses in 2001 and 2002. Moreover, the women who took part in these programs received traditional vocational training, even when technological training programs were available. As a result, Palestinian women are concentrated in “feminine” professions, where there is no scope for professional development, no requirements for special skills, and low wages. (CEDAW, 2005: 35) From this data, it can be inferred that the orientalist policies pursued by Israel

towards Palestinian women play a role in reinforcing the “inferior” status of Palestinian women and thwarting their development.

The same report adds that the shortage of industrial areas in Palestinian communities—only 3.2% of industrial areas supported by the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor are located in Palestinian areas (CEDAW, 2005)—contributes to the scarcity of workplaces in the Palestinian community in general, and for Palestinian women in particular.

The same report corroborates Awad’s (2006) conclusion that the absence of “employment services” offices has a negative impact on employment rates among Palestinian women in general, and not only women academics. The report further states that of 120 offices, only 14 operate in Palestinian communities. (CEDAW, 2005) Consequently they are of limited accessibility for women living in these communities, and extremely difficult to access for women living outside them, given the poor state of public transportation, as discussed above.

In addition to these institutional obstacles, studies indicate that racism within Israeli society and among Jewish employers plays a role in the non-involvement of Palestinian women in the labor market. For instance, research conducted by Jabareen, mentioned above, indicates that in addition to the scarcity of employment opportunities, a major reason for the non-engagement of Palestinian women in the labor market is racism on the part of Jewish employers. He goes on to argue that the research findings affirm that many Jewish employers refuse to employ Arabs, and in particular Arab women. (*Haaretz*, June 8th, 2009)

This claim bears out an argument put forward by Umaima Diab (2009) in an article on the experiences of Palestinian women working in Haifa. Diab states that the conditioning of employment on the criteria of military service and knowledge of Russian, together with the racism and discrimination faced by women who wear the headscarf when applying to Israeli employers for work, all add to the obstacles to the entry of Palestinian women into the Israeli labor market. (Diab, 2009: 141)

There is a multitude of reasons for the low level of engagement in the labor market among Palestinian women, and Palestinian society bears some of the responsibility for it. However, as the foregoing discussion reveals, state racism and state policies of marginalization and discrimination practiced towards the Palestinian minority in Israel in general, constitutes the main barrier to the advancement of the socio-economic status of Palestinian society as a whole. These policies, by using the cover of culturally essentialist justifications as one mechanism, contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of the “inferior” status of Palestinian women, thereby impeding their social progress.

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