From Tokenism to Meaningful Representation: Insights into the Experiences of Palestinian Arab Women in Local Politics in Israel

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This study explores Palestinian Arab women's experiences in Israeli local politics, focusing on the challenges they face and the implications for their representation. Through interviews and analysis, the study uncovers a gap between the quantitative and qualitative representation of women in political positions. While there has been an increase in the number of women holding office, the qualitative evaluations reveal persistent barriers and inequalities. The women interviewed encountered obstacles such as gender biases, tokenism, and limited control over the electoral process, which hinder their full-fledged participation. The study results demonstrate the role of early community engagement in shaping women's political involvement, the challenges of balancing familial and political responsibilities, the importance of family support and the role of civil society organizations play in providing training and support for women candidates, filling a void left by political parties. The results also show that despite their passive role in the electoral process, the Palestinian Arab women local politicians exercise some degree of agency by seeking self-empowerment and support. Overall, the study results suggest the need for ongoing efforts to promote gender equality, empower women in decision-making processes, and bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative representation.

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Keywords: Politics, Women, Culture, Barriers, Agency

Introduction

The significance of local politics lies in its impact on the representation of women in politics. This sphere of governance is particularly important because it operates in close proximity to the citizens and serves as the primary provider of daily necessities, in contrast to national politics which is less familiar to individuals in terms of personal experience and the workings of bureaucracy (Choudhry and Richard 2014; Sumbas 2020). The past decade has indeed witnessed a significant increase in women's presence in local politics (Barnett and Shalaby 2023). According to the newly published United Nations (UN) Women in Local Government data set (2022), women constitute 36% of local deliberative bodies worldwide compared to merely 25% in national parliaments. Much of this increase is the result of gender quotas (Sumbas 2020). The Gender Quotas Database (International IDEA 2022) shows that as of 2021, 75 countries had some form of gender quota on the local level. That said, reality in Israel-on which this paper focuses, is different. With no statuary laws or quotas to guarantee women representation in local politics in Israel, and with only monetary incentives rewarding lists including women, that are usually not utilized (Desivilya-Syna et al. 2020), women representation is significantly lower on the local level (around 16.2%) compared to the national level (around 24%) (Knesset Research and Information Center 2018). This under-representation of women is more apparent among the Palestinian Arab women in Israel whose representation on the local level is barely 2% (ibid). However, despite the low percentage of Palestinian Arab women representation in local politics in Israel, there has a been a slow but steady rise in their participation from the 70s (the decade in which Arab women started entering local politics in Israel) until recently. As for the present term 2018-2023, according to Awad, the director of *Women against Violence* organization in Nazareth, Israel, there are about 25 Palestinian Arab women serving in different local authorities in Israel, compared to only 3 in the 70s (Awad personal communication, June 1st, 2023).

Although research about Israeli women in local politics abound, there is little research about Palestinian Arab women local politicians in Israel. This fact may be accounted for the recentness of this sociological phenomenon, as Palestinian Arab women started entering the local political arena only in the 70s of the previous century. Another reason for the scarcity of research may be ascribed to the marginalization of the Israeli media of Arab women local politicians (Abu Oqsa- Daoud 2003; Harker and Russel 2019), which in turn may be translated into a lack of interest of researchers in this topic, and hardships reaching the women. Regardless of the reason, for Arab women in traditional patriarchal societies to occupy public and political positions, despite the tremendous difficulties, this is a development that must be acknowledged and researched (Al Maaitah et al. 2011), as participation of women at top tiers can benefit the society at large,

especially by sustaining the democratic processes (Moghadam 2010), and is significant for the formation of the world view of gender equality (McGee 2010; Sumbas 2020). Research by Norris and Inglehart (2019) highlights that increased female representation leads to improved policy outcomes and a more democratic governance process. Yet, women participation in local politics in Israel faces tremendous barriers (Desivilya-Syna et al. 2020).

In compliance with the studies on the critical role of women in local governance for the promotion of gender equality and the barriers in the way of these women the intention in this study is to take the existing discussions of women's role in local politics one step further. To this end the focus of this article is the experience of Palestinian Arab women in Israeli local politics in light of their numerical increase but in a holistic manner targeting their experience prior to during and after their election for one term (i.e. 2013-2018) or more (i.e. 2018-2023) and striving to extend our knowledge and critique of these women's process of political engagement, limitations, but also insights.

Literature Review

The World Economic Forum examines the global gender gap across four leading indices: educational attainment, health and survival, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment. According to its data, the most striking gender disparity based on the share of women is still in politics (WEF 2018). Women, in general, face a myriad of obstacles on their way to politics. The structuralist and binary way in which gender roles are viewed are detrimental to their integration in politics, as the public sphere has always been linked to males and the private one to females (Herzog 1994, 1999). Despite women's entrance into the political public sphere, it has been found that they are once again subjected to a binary hierarchy that categorizes them based on expectations and responsibilities (Desivilya Syna et al. 2020).

The concepts of demand and supply offer insights into the barriers that hinder women's progress towards political positions (Holman and Schneider 2018; Krook 2010). Demand-side explanations refer to external factors that are beyond the control of women themselves (Holman and Schneider 2018). These factors include structural elements such as gender discrimination (Sapiro 1981; Briggs 2000; McGlen et al. 2011), gender stereotypes held by voters (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Koch 2000; Fox and Smith 2001), lack of role models (Briggs 2000), male dominance and the prevalence of macho presenteeism (Farrel and Titcombe 2016), as well as institutional factors within the political system itself (Duerst-Lahti 1998; Desivilya-Syna et al. 2020) and dynamics within political parties (Sanbonmatsu 2002; Niven 2006). On the supply side, which pertains to women's

choices and aspirations influenced by gendered socialization patterns (Holman and Schneider 2018), there are various factors at play. These factors encompass the motherhood penalty (Carroll 1989; Stalsburg 2012; Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Holman and Schneider 2018), underrepresentation in crucial professions such as business and law, which often serve as steppingstones for political careers (Sweet-Cushman 2016; Holman and Schneider 2018), and gender disparities in terms of self-efficacy and self-reliance (Lawless and Fox 2005; 2010).

New research examining women's experiences in local governments per se indicates that cultural factors play a more prominent role in perpetuating the exclusion of women from local politics compared to institutional and structural factors (Sumbas 2020). These cultural factors include an androcentric political culture, religious beliefs, and the persistence of traditional attitudes towards women's involvement in politics (Norris and Inglehart 2001). This leads to significant barriers for women in participating and being represented in elections and political processes. Notably, political networks often function as exclusive "old-boys' clubs" at the local level, particularly in rural areas with smaller populations, where men predominantly occupy local offices (ibid).

Women from various cultures encounter barriers from both the demand and supply sides of the equation. However, ethnic minority women face additional challenges and cumulative disadvantages within politics (Murray 2016). Descriptive analyses reveal a significant underrepresentation of minority women in politics as a whole, although the extent of their exclusion varies across different geographical locations (Hughes 2013). Interestingly, the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities in elected office can paradoxically provide advantages for ethnic minority women (Mügge et al. 2019). In certain countries, such as the United States, a higher proportion of elected officials with Latino and African American backgrounds are women rather than men (Hardy-Fanta 2013; Orey and Brown 2014). Similarly, in New Zealand, ethnic minority women, particularly Māori, are better represented among MPs compared to ethnic majority MPs (Barker and Coffe 2018). In the national parliaments of Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden, women with immigrant backgrounds have better representation than their male counterparts, although this is not the case in countries like France, Germany, Greece, and Italy (Mügge et al. 2019). For instance, in France, the descriptive representation of minority women has been slowly improving, but their inclusion is conditional on their willingness to serve as symbols of secularity and assimilation, which can limit the substantive representation of Muslim women (Murray, 2016). In the aforementioned countries, ethnic minority women seem to benefit from a "multiple identity advantage," experiencing less discrimination due to their dual assignment to underrepresented groups (Mügge and Erzeel 2016).

Palestinian Arab women in Israel represent a unique intersection of minority identities, including gender, ethnicity, nationality, and language, in comparison to the Jewish majority population in Israel (Abu Baker 2017). Similar to what has been observed, they also face significant under-representation in both local and national politics. However, unlike the "multiple identity advantage" discussed by Mügge and Erzeel (2016), Palestinian Arab women in Israel do not experience such benefits due to the conflicting nature of their two major identities: Palestinian and Israeli. These opposing identities do not contribute to a cohesive definition of identity but instead create a situation where exclusionary identities coexist (Samucha 1980, 2004; Haidar 1994). The passing of the nation-state law in 2018 in Israel has intensified the tension between the Palestinian and Israeli identities. This law redefines the Israeli state in terms that exclusively emphasize ethnicity, placing Palestinian citizens in a precarious position where they are neither fully stateless nor granted full citizenship rights (Jamal and Kensicki 2019).

As stated above, the current research aims to investigate the dynamics of gender equality in municipal government among Palestinian Arab women in Israel, especially considering the quantitative increase in their representation and based on their experiences and insights. It focuses on understanding the process through which these women make their way to an elected local office from a holistic approach. However, it is crucial that the specific context of the Palestinian Arab women in Israel is presented before discussing the results, for a better understanding of the environment these women operate within.

Context: Palestinian Arab Citizens in Israel

Following the 1948 War, known as *Nakba* to the Palestinians, over 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were either expelled or fled from the newly established state of Israel, leaving only 160,000 within its borders (Abu Lughod 1971; Jiryis 1976; Lustick 1980; Piterberg 2001). From 1948 to 1966, Palestinians in Israel were subjected to strict military administration and were viewed as a potential fifth column (Abu Saad and Champagne 2006). Scholars from various disciplines have extensively documented the political, economic, and social discrimination experienced by this community, as well as their subordination to the Jewish majority in nearly all aspects of society, including income, education, occupation, employment, property ownership, and community development (Kraus and Hodge 1990; Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov 1992; Rabinowitz 2000). Consequently, the socioeconomic status of Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel is significantly lower than that of Jewish citizens. Governmental and non-governmental reports, such as the Or Commission Report (2003), have extensively documented and recognized the systematic discrimination faced by this minority on a national level.

The current population of Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel exceeds two million, constituting approximately 21.1% of the country's total population. Most of this population identifies as Muslim, with smaller communities of Christians and Druze (CBS 2023). Despite being traditionally patriarchal, the Palestinian Arab community in Israel has experienced significant social transformations due to its unique position as a national minority within a predominantly Jewish country and its interactions with Jewish society (Meler 2019). This community exists along a spectrum between traditionalism and modernity (Abu Baker 2003). The level of tradition or modernity within this society impacts the distribution of family roles and has implications for women's status and their ability to progress and succeed (ibid). Palestinian Arab women in Israel are part of the Palestinian Arab population, which is perceived by the Jewish majority as part of the hostile Arab nation. As a result, opportunities for advancement within Israeli society have been limited for them. One tactic employed by the Israeli establishment was the promotion of traditional clan or tribal local political leadership to exert control over the Arab population while maintaining internal divisions as a counterbalance to the formation of a shared national identity (Abu Oqsa-Daoud 2002). These barriers have significantly hindered the social, economic, and political progress of Palestinian women, as well as the rest of the Arab population within the country (Suleiman 1998; Jamal and Kensicki 2019) resulting in a scarcity of role models for these women, among other challenges. For example, in a study conducted among the Palestinian Arab population in Israel, a direct correlation was found between the female models encountered by women and their perception of their own leadership capabilities. According to the research, presenting unfulfilled potential models to women who were forced to give up their careers for the sake of potential leadership had an impact on their perception of themselves and their ability to lead. This finding helps explain the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions among Israeli women and minority populations in particular (Baransy 2022). In other words, exposure to female models affects internal barriers, creates a sense of capability and confidence, and motivates them to pursue leadership roles.

Despite facing intersecting challenges posed by societal structures and state policies that undermine Israel's Arab minority, Arab women have made progress in terms of education, employment (Sabbah-Karkaby 2017) and political representation, yet their participation in the political sphere continues to be slow, primarily due to the complex barriers they face (Abu Baker 2017; Desyvilya-Syna et al. 2020). Nevertheless, Arab women have been able to leverage various social resources to navigate these obstacles. These resources encompass their personal attributes, professional experiences, academic backgrounds, and political engagement (Hanif 2016).

Palestinian Arab Women in Local Politics in Israel:

Palestinian Arab women in Israel embody a mosaic of religious identities, shaped by centuries of historical, geographical, and social intersections. The majority of them are Muslim, predominantly of the Sunni denomination Nevertheless, there is also a significant Christian minority that encompasses several denominations. Additionally, there exists a Druze community, which is an offshoot of Islam, but with distinct religious beliefs and practices (Halabi 2014). Bedouin women in Israel occupy a unique sociocultural space that intersects both Palestinian Arab identity and the broader Arab world's nomadic traditions (Abu Rabia-Queder 2007). Historically, the Bedouins led a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle in the Negev desert, but Israeli state policies in the latter half of the 20th century have impacted their way of life, pushing many towards a more sedentary existence in townships. The transition has influenced the Bedouin women's roles and their social statuses. This dual pull of tradition and modernity often places Bedouin women in a challenge, as they negotiate between the expectations of their community and their personal aspirations. Moreover, their economic conditions, combined with lower literacy rates compared to other Arab groups, add another layer of complexity to their experiences (Abu Rabia-Queder 2007). However, despite these challenges, many Bedouin women are active agents of change in their communities, advocating for greater rights and opportunities, yet although women have little access to public, they are politically socialized in the private space and conduct "private politics" by acting within the tribal organization and today the familial organization (Martue 2005; Abu Rabia-Queder 2007) This tapestry of religious backgrounds influences the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of Palestinian Arab women in Israel visa-vis their representation in politics. For example, while up until conducting this study, there has been no Bedouin woman local politician in any local authority, historically Christian women outnumbered Muslim and Druze women in local politics (Abu Oqsa-Dauod 2003), but the picture has changed recently (Zaher 2019), as research shows and is presented below.

The representation of Palestinian Arab women in local government is a recent development. The first breakthrough occurred in 1969 when Mrs. Violette Khoury was elected as the first female member of a local council in the Arab village of Kfar Yassif in northern Israel. She later became the mayor in the subsequent 1973 elections, marking a significant milestone. However, since then, no Arab woman has been elected as a mayor. In the same year, Mrs. Samira Khoury ran for the municipal council of Nazareth and was elected, but her term was cut short as the council was dissolved shortly thereafter (Abu Oqsa-Dauod 2003). Following these pioneers, a small number of Palestinian Arab women in Israel started to join local councils. From the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 until 1998, only

twelve Arab women served as members of Arab local councils. Between 2003 and 2018, an additional 25 women followed, with most of them having served in all-Arab local authorities, while only a few in local authorities of mixed Jewish-Arab cities (Awad personal communication June 1st, ,2023).

The profile of local Arab women politicians in Israel has undergone both quantitative and qualitative changes over the years. Until 1998, the typical profile of Arab women involved in local politics was as follows: they were usually in their 30s or 40s, married with children, hailing from political families, or married to politicians, predominantly Christian, and residing in the northern Galilee region (Abu Oqsa-Daoud 2003). However, in the 2003 local elections, there were some notable shifts in the profile of women participating in local politics. Muslim and Druze women also entered the political arena, and they were all educated and politically active through the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Jabha-Hadash), a socialist party with communist affiliations. These changes highlight the diversification and widening of participation among Arab women in local politics in terms of religious affiliation and political engagement. Nonetheless according to Zaher (2019), starting from the 2008 elections, the diversity of women involved in local politics has expanded, including women in their fifties and sixties for the first time. The elections in 2013 even saw the election of two grandmothers and two widows, which was unprecedented. Unlike previous trends, many of these elected women did not come from politically active families or have personal affiliations with male politicians. Instead, they came from average lower-middle-class families with no political background. In terms of religious representation, there was an increase in the number of elected Muslim women compared to Christian women. Geographically, more elected women represented the central part of Israel, rather than just the northern region. Educationally, not all elected women had academic training, marking a departure from the previous trend. Furthermore, politically, more women were elected from local independent lists rather than national political lists. These changes reflect a growing diversity and widening representation of women in local politics in terms of age, family background, religion, geography, education, and political affiliation. These developments indicate a turning point in conservative Palestinian Arab cultural values and perception of married and widowed women's role, especially that, according to Abu Bakr (2010), the social status of divorced and widowed women is the lowest in the Arab familial hierarchy. It was especially the 2018 elections' results that confirm this social change towards widowed women as for the first time, an elected Palestinian Arab Druze widowed woman headed a list of mostly men (Zaher 2019).

However, in addition to the lifting of some structural and cultural barriers before Arab women (Sabbah-Karkaby 2017), there was another political change

that cooccurred and which, in turn, triggered a social change in the candidates' profiles in the scene of the municipal government in both the Jewish community (Zubeda and Lavie 2015) and the Arab community in Israel (Khalaileh 2019). The law that formed the basis of this fundamental change or substantial "electoral revolution" in the State of Israel - the law of direct election to the mayorship-came into effect for the first time in the local authority elections in 1978. This law separated for the first time in Israel two structures of the municipal election system that until now were one, the election of the mayorship and the election to the municipal council. Among the several ramifications of this law are the personalization of politics and a change in the profile of local political candidates (King and Totnaor 2015), as most of the local candidates didn't represent national parties anymore, but local independent lists containing candidates showing a more diverse spectrum of personal profiles (Zubeda and Lavie 2015; Khalaileh 2019). Simultaneously, Zaher (2019) demonstrated a shift in the personal profiles of Palestinian Arab women local politicians in Israel as well over a period of time extending from 1970s until 2018.

Methodology

The qualitative research design chosen for this study is well-suited for exploring the experiences and perspectives of Palestinian Arab women in local politics in Israel. The use of in-depth face-to-face interviews as the main data collection tool allows for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, barriers, and insights. The researcher's personal familiarity with many of the participants, stemming from her own background as a former local politician, has facilitated the recruitment process. The author is aware of the fact her positionality as an insider within the research population holds significant implications for the research process and outcomes. As highlighted by scholars such Holmes and Darwin (2020), an insider perspective enables a deep understanding of the culture, norms, and dynamics of the population under study. This intimate familiarity can facilitate trust and rapport-building, leading to richer data collection and more nuanced analysis. However, the potential for bias and subjectivity should not be overlooked, as indicated by Haraway (1988). Mercer (2007) suggests that an insider's position is a 'double-edged sword' in that what is gained in one area may be lost in another. Balancing the benefits of insider insights with the need for critical distance, the researcher has employed peer review of her reflections and interpretations allowing participants themselves to authenticate the quotes I used.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling the participants to share their unique experiences while still focusing on the predetermined headings of "Before election," "During elections," and "After election." To ensure ethical considerations, the interviews were taped and

transcribed with the participants' permission. Anonymity was maintained by coding their names and not revealing specific details about ruling periods, places, or political affiliations.

The researcher's thorough reading and familiarization with the transcribed interviews, followed by the identification of categories under the predetermined headings, contribute to a structured and organized analysis process. Overall, the chosen research design, data collection method, and analysis approach provide a robust foundation for exploring the experiences and perspectives of Palestinian Arab women local politicians in Israel.

Findings and Discussion

The following section offers a broader examination of women's experience in local politics by drawing on the rich information obtained from the interviews. It presents a description of elected women's experience as council members. 15 women were interviewed about their experience prior to their election, during their term of office and their insights afterwards. Their interpretation of and commentary on their experience are thematically categorized under three headings: Before Election, During Election and After Election.

Before Election

Early community Engagement:

These elected women's political activism had its roots in extensive social activism at a very early age, as was reported by all the women interviewed. They were all socially involved within their schools, scouts' troupes, or community centers from a very early age, and most of them had even competed for either membership or leadership on student councils and had experienced school-level elections.

> *"I was always the one who planned events at school, who took major roles in school plays, who worked through the Student Union to mediate between students and the teachers ... I was always there. "*

> *"In my childhood, I was very active at school. I was a leader. I was a member of the choir, and they always gave me the leading part because I had a beautiful voice. I was also a member of the scouts ... class committees ... I was always present on every stage. "*

Indeed, research has shown that women who have a history of childhood community activity are more likely to engage in politics later in life (Lawless and Fox 2010).

Other studies have found that women who participated in youth organizations, community service projects, or student government during their formative years are more inclined to pursue political careers and actively participate in political processes as adults (Verba et al. 1995). This involvement in community activities during childhood provides a foundation for developing leadership skills, fostering a sense of civic responsibility, and nurturing a commitment to public service (Sanbonmatsu 2006). In this respect, Palestinian Arb women politicians are not different. Overall, the link between childhood community activity and women's political engagement highlights the significance of early engagement in fostering a pipeline of future female leaders in politics.

Initiation of Candidacy:
However, despite an abundant record of social activity from childhood, and varied political activism during adulthood, for many of the interviewed women about their experience prior to their elections, the decision to run for municipal office was not their own. And it turns out, not only was the initiative not theirs, but the whole idea never occurred to them. They were all approached by influential men in their parties and asked to run for office, as it became clear that lists which included women would be more acceptable to voters. List recruiters may have also been motivated by the Knesset law according to which monetary incentives were offered to lists including women in guaranteed places. Research has indeed highlighted instances where women are pushed into politics by men within their parties or lists (Krook 2010).This phenomenon, often referred to as "party gatekeeping," occurs when male party leaders or gatekeepers actively encourage or recruit women candidates to address gender imbalances within political representation (Krook 2017). While such efforts can be seen as a positive step toward gender equality in politics, they also raise concerns about tokenism and the potential for women to be perceived as "quota candidates" or mere placeholders (Krook 2010). Some of the interviewed women reported that not having a say about their placement in the list, as most of them were first time candidates and not aware of the placement procedures in their parties, and feeling "indebted", using their own terminology, to party gatekeepers for having been chosen by them in the first place, limited their scope of action in certain political moves.

> *"This unspoken approach that reminded us all the time that if it hadn't been for them –the party's men - we would never have made it- is devastating. It's as if they're saying: 'we encouraged you ...we brought you here in the first place, so we can raise you up or lower you down as we wish.'. All this dynamic is unhealthy. As long as we passively submit to the wishes of those who control and run the list construction and the election campaign, and as long as we keep having little say and control over the process, they'll never take us seriously."*

Hesitation and Fear:

Even after having been approached, most of the women expressed hesitation or rejection of the idea. Married women resisted the idea more vehemently than single ones, but almost none of them embraced the idea enthusiastically or without expressing reservations and apprehension. Many fretted that political involvement would be at the expense of their time with their families, children, or jobs. Others feared that they would not measure up to what was expected of them or that they would be a disappointment due to their lack of political acumen.

> *"They approached me and informed me of their decision to have me run for office. I freaked out. The task is not easy, I said, and I am not ready for it. It is a great responsibility and it's too big for me. What about my kids? They still need me, I said. But they pushed me into it, so I had no choice."*

> *"They pressed me a lot and assured me that the post was not particularly demanding and that they would not burden me. After many attempts of persuasion and emotional blackmail, I agreed ... and only after two years did, I realize that I had made a mistake and resigned."*

The reservations that the women expressed before accepting the offer are in line with previous research about the role of motherhood and familial obligations in curtailing women's chances of entering politics (Phillips 1995; Lawless and Fox 2010). Additionally, women may perceive themselves as lacking the necessary qualifications or experience to enter politics leading to a lack of self-confidence in their ability to succeed in a political arena dominated by men (Fox and Lawless 2005). This self-perceived competence gap can discourage women from pursuing political careers and contribute to their underrepresentation in political decision-making bodies.

During Election

Familial Support:

Regardless of the level of their hesitation and its motivation, all the women stated that their nuclear families ultimately supported them. Some of them reported assistance from their extended families as well. They all admitted that without their nuclear families' support, they would not have succeeded. In their opinion, it is a basic prerequisite for coping with and succeeding in politics. Some of the women spoke not only of support, but also of a sense of pride among family members. The children boasted about their mothers being "celebrities", as some of the interviewees put it. Familial support plays a crucial role in the success of women candidates in politics and is considered as a kind of a symbolic capital (Spark et al. 2019). Furthermore, family members, such as parents and siblings,

can provide financial support, campaign assistance, and act as influential advocates within their social networks (Murray 2014). Family support also contributes to women's self-confidence and self-esteem, as it creates an enabling environment that validates their political ambitions and capabilities (Lawless and Fox 2010). However, the sense of support and pride that the nuclear family lavished on these women faded somewhat at the mid-point of the process, when the mothers' time and energy were divided among home, work, and the public post. Complaints on the part of children and spouses were not uncommon during the campaigning and election period, placing an additional burden on these women. Support is there, as it seems to be, but not along the whole way.

> *"My husband supported me. At first, I hesitated, but he encouraged me and promised to help. My children were involved in all this. They felt pride in their mother. My parents were divided ... but my husband and children were very supportive."*

> *"Suddenly, in the middle of my term, my supposedly supporting children and husband started to voice discomfort and criticism about my public post; they lost patience and my son's performance at school deteriorated ...I felt guilty".*

The Role of Civil Society:

Another source of support reported by the interviewees was women's networking and civic society. Yet, women's support of one another was relevant only for those candidates who were official members of national political parties, in which all the members were better-acquainted and shared a history of activism. This held less true for those women who joined independent or newly constructed lists in which members were all new to each other and had very little in common. Civil society organizations were also of help to many of these women, equipping them with the proper tools for their campaigns and future posts, filling a void that political parties did not address ,as the interviewees reported. All the women interviewed claimed that they were forced to rely either on themselves, or on external assistance (such as social organizations or registration in courses) to cope with the unfamiliar environment of the new political role they were running for, as the political bodies that had nominated them had failed to support them. Campaign funding was provided by the parties represented by the women. If it weren't for that, very few of them could have succeeded, as the electoral process is costly and would have been beyond their means.

> *"During campaigning, social organizations - feminist associations - supported me. There I found support from women. But beyond that support, I also asked for help from professional bodies at my own expense."*

It has been documented that civil society organizations play a vital role in raising awareness about women's rights and the benefits of women's representation in decision-making processes (Tripp 2015). They provide training programs, mentorship opportunities, and networking platforms that empower women to develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence to pursue political careers (Krook 2013). By creating a supportive environment and amplifying women's voices, civil society plays a vital role in advancing gender equality and increasing women's representation in political posts.

Awareness and self-Empowerment:
For most of these women, it was their first election and position as local politicians, apart from one woman who was serving her second term. Therefore, their awareness of the whole process of list construction, campaigning and other relevant issues was limited. They trusted party leaders and gatekeepers and accepted any place on the list that was offered to them. They did not argue or object to any decision that was made on their behalf. Thus, they played a passive role in the electoral process and had little to say or control, as they knew very little about its dynamics. The women's description of the process implied that the list compilers used them like chess pieces, moving them upwards or downwards according to their political interests.

> "*I was in sixth place on the list. I did not really understand the meaning of my place. I did not argue. I was meant to be the first woman on the list, but due to considerations of religious balance, they preferred to place a Christian woman ahead of me and I said nothing and did not even object. I thought it was how things should go. Next time I will not accept their dictations. I want a more advanced place. I deserve it ... I earned it ... I worked hard for it.* "

The elected women were not randomly chosen by party heads or compilers of the lists. They were women with added electoral value and worth. The added value of these specific women lay in the fact that they had some personal capital, either in the form of a very wide social network, an extended family, high academic status, or prominent professional standing. Though all the women interviewed had their own added value due to success on the social or professional level, and although many of them were themselves political activists, they knew very little about public posts and the legal and social environment in which they lived. The new environment required training that was not provided by their parties, yet as indicated above, they were forced to acquire it through other channels. Self-empowerment was a strong motif that surfaced in the women's accounts of their experience. They sought self-education and empowerment in order not to feel inferior to their male counterparts in the council and to strengthen their right to be there. Among the skills they stressed as imperative and essential for local council members, and which they lacked at the beginning, and sought solutions

for, they listed the following: familiarization with relevant laws and practices, budget reading and analysis, project planning and media dynamics.

> *"No one prepared me in my party for the position of a city council member. They just threw me into it. If it were not for the skills I acquired from my work, I would have been lost. How to deal with people and how to read a budget are things that we as representatives of the public need to learn and prepare for... these are things that can make a difference between a council member who feels good about herself and one who does not."*

> *"I'm not good with the media. In interviews I lose self-confidence. I missed many opportunities because of that and maybe lost much support from my audience because I never knew how to express myself well.*

As demonstrated above, self-empowerment for Palestinian Arab women in local politics entails a range of strategies and aspirations that contribute to their advancement and effectiveness within the political arena. Through seeking private lessons with professionals, empowerment courses, mentorship, as reported by them, these women often strove for increased visibility, enhanced leadership skills and performance, and the dismantling of gender biases and stereotypes. Seeking self-empowerment is an exercise of agency despite the lack of awareness and control they had over their own candidacy and campaign.

After Election

Evaluation of Experiences:
After spending one whole term at least serving in a public post as council members, the women evaluated what they had experienced differently. There were women who evaluated it as a positive experience despite the difficulties, asserting that it was eye-opening, socially enriching and politically empowering. Conversely, many others reported having had a negative experience, arguing that they were not taken seriously as women politicians, that they were under evaluated, used for electoral reasons only, and were even reprimanded if they took their role seriously and spoke their minds. One woman claimed that even though there were more women out there fulfilling their roles as politicians, the system was still very patriarchal and did not take them seriously. Another interviewee added that the system did not expect women to act as real politicians, but rather as a superficial façade purporting diversity and gender equality. Despite their criticisms, all the interviewees encouraged other women to enter politics, but also to research this field before making their decision, empower themselves and prepare their families for a time-consuming public post.

"It was a positive experience. I learned a lot through it and managed to help a lot of people, and this gives me satisfaction. My personality has not changed, but my circle of influence has expanded. This post gave me more tools to help more people. "

"I do call upon women to join local politics, but on condition that they are 100 percent convinced and want it with all their might. My advice to these women is that the initiative must be personal, and she mustn't wait for men to tell her whether she is good enough or not. She must believe in herself and her abilities to succeed in this role."

To sum up, the findings from this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of Palestinian Arab women who entered local politics. The women interviewed in this research demonstrated a history of social activism from an early age, indicating that their political engagement had roots in their extensive involvement in community activities during childhood. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the link between childhood community activity and women's political engagement (Lawless and Fox 2010; Celis et al. 2019). Thus, early engagement in community activities can serve as a foundation for cultivating future female leaders in politics. However, it is important to note that despite their history of social activism, many of the women interviewed did not initiate their decision to run for municipal office. Instead, influential men in their parties approached them and asked them to run, motivated by the desire to create more acceptable and diverse lists of candidates. The women interviewed expressed limited control and agency in their placement on the electoral lists, which restricted their scope of action in certain political moves. The women's lack of awareness and control over the electoral process was evident, as they trusted party leaders and gatekeepers to make decisions on their behalf. This passive role in the electoral process reflects the limited political knowledge and understanding of the dynamics involved. This highlights the need for a more inclusive and empowering approach to women's participation in politics, where women have a genuine say in their candidacy and are not merely recruited to address gender imbalances or to meet electoral demands or monetary incentives.

During the election process, the support of their nuclear families played a crucial role in the success of the women candidates. The women acknowledged the importance of family support in coping with the demands of politics and felt a sense of pride among family members, thus aligning with previous research emphasizing the role of motherhood and familial obligations in limiting women's chances of entering politics (Lawless and Fox 2010). However, it was noted that this support waned to some extent during the campaigning and election period, as the women's time and energy were divided among home, work, and their public posts. Complaints from spouses and children added an additional burden to these

women, highlighting the challenges faced by women in balancing their familial and political responsibilities.

Women's networking and support from civil society organizations were also reported as sources of assistance for the women candidates. However, the level of support varied depending on whether the women were members of established political parties or newly constructed lists. Civil society organizations filled a void left by political parties, offering training programs, mentorship opportunities, and networking platforms to empower women in pursuing political careers. These organizations played a crucial role in raising awareness about women's rights and promoting gender equality in political decision-making processes. The reliance on external assistance further underscores the need for political parties to provide comprehensive support and training to women candidates to ensure their success in unfamiliar political environments. Despite their lack of awareness of electoral processes, the women expressed a desire for self-empowerment and sought to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their roles as council members. This self-empowerment exercise demonstrated their agency and determination to overcome the competence gap perceived by many women in entering politics (Fox and Lawless 2005). The importance of self-education and empowerment in addressing the challenges faced by women in political positions cannot be overstated.

The evaluation of experiences by the women who served as council members provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities they encountered in their political roles. It is evident that there is a range of perspectives among the women, with some viewing their experiences as positive and empowering, while others express dissatisfaction and frustration with the system. The positive evaluations highlight the transformative nature of political engagement, with women describing their experiences as eye-opening, socially enriching, and politically empowering. They emphasize the sense of satisfaction derived from being able to help people and expand their circle of influence. This suggests that despite the obstacles they faced, these women were able to make a meaningful impact in their communities and effect positive change through their roles as council members. On the other hand, the negative evaluations shed light on the persistent gender biases and patriarchal norms that women encounter in politics. Women expressed feelings of not being taken seriously, being undervalued, and being used for electoral purposes without genuine support. This highlights the need for systemic changes to address the underlying gender inequalities and power dynamics that hinder women's participation in politics. It also underscores the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments where women's voices are heard, respected, and valued .The interviewees also noted the challenge of balancing their political responsibilities with family obligations. This resonates

with the broader literature on women in politics, which emphasizes the difficulties faced by women in juggling multiple roles and the need for supportive structures to enable their participation. The women's advice to future candidates to research and prepare themselves and their families highlights the importance of having a comprehensive understanding of the demands and expectations of political office.

Conclusion

The evaluation of experiences by Palestinian Arab women in Israeli local politics demonstrates the complex realities and mixed sentiments they encountered during their political tenure and sheds light on the existing gap between quantitative and qualitative representation. While there may be an increase in the number of Palestinian Arab women holding political positions, their experiences reveal persistent challenges and inequalities. The quantitative representation, measured by the number of women in office, may suggest progress, but the qualitative representation, captured through the women's evaluations, highlights the ongoing marginalization and discrimination they face. The women's accounts emphasize the need to address patriarchal systems, gender biases, tokenism, and limited control over the electoral process to create an inclusive political landscape that values women's voices and contributions. The challenges faced in the Palestinian Arab community in Israel hinder the eradication of distributive injustice and political inequality within its democratic system, specifically concerning the representation of women and their interests. By examining the barriers encountered by elected women, it becomes evident how local politics, with its gendered nature, restricts women's representation and impedes the ability of women in office to assume prominent roles.

Although there may be a growing acceptance of women's engagement in municipal councils from a wider spectrum of age, religions, political affiliation, geographical location, level of education and social status, as evidenced by the subsequent themes, Palestinian Arab women in Israel still encounter various obstacles in local politics representation that they must overcome to actively participate to the fullest extent. Ultimately, the women's experiences highlight the importance of ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and empower women in political decision-making at the local level. Achieving true gender equality and representation for Palestinian Arab women in Israeli local politics requires not only increasing their numerical presence but also ensuring their voices are heard, their perspectives are valued, and their experiences shape policy decisions. The insights provided by these women can inform policy initiatives aimed at creating more inclusive and supportive political environments, empowering women to overcome challenges, and fostering genuine gender equality in political representation.

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