

The Palestinians in Israel

Readings in History, Politics and Society

Second Volume

Edited by

Nadim N. Rouhana and Areej Sabbagh-Khoury

2018



Mada al-Carmel

Arab Center for Applied Social Research

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Table of Contents

Palestinian Citizens of Israel - Evolution of a Name	5
Manar Makhoul	
The October Uprising	18
Thabet Abu Ras	
Family Reunification Legislation in Israel	32
Mazen Masri	
Palestinian Refugees' Property in Their Own Land: Politics of Absence and Alienation	42
Haneen Naamnih	
The Jewish National Fund	59
Suhad Bishara	
National Planning Policy in Israel	73
Yousef Jabareen	
Israel's Seizure of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf)	85
Ahmad Natour	
Palestinians in Palestinian cities in Israel: A settler colonial reality	101
Areej Sabbagh-Khoury	
Jurisdictional Area of the Arab Communities in Israel	119
Yousef Jabareen	
The Limits of Electoral Politics: Section 7A of Basic Law: The Knesset	129
Mazen Masri	
The Al-Ard Movement	139
Leena Dallashch	
Sons of the Village Movement	149
Mohanad Mustafa	
The Nationalist Progressive Movement	160
Aziz Haidar	

Historical Development of the Israeli Communist Party	175
Mustafa Kabha	
Israel's Communist Party: At the Crossroads, 1948-2012	186
Udi Adiv	
The Islamic Movement in Israel: Historical and Ideological Development	199
Nohad Ali	
The National Democratic Assembly	215
Nimer Sultany	
The Palestinian Women's Movement: Palestinian Feminism in Israel	230
Khawla Abu-Baker	
The Student Movement and Palestinian Student Activism in Israel	249
Mohanad Mustafa	
Palestinian Civil Society in Israel	263
Mtanes Shihadeh	

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The Palestinian Women's Movement: Palestinian Feminism in Israel

Khawla Abu-Baker

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The Palestinian Women's Movement: Palestinian Feminism in Israel

Khawla Abu-Baker*

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of the development of Palestinian women's activism in national, political, and social life from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present day. It also aims to link the nature of women's activism to broader national, political, and economic conditions and to explore the impact that women's activism had on these respective conditions. The chapter concludes by discussing the nature of the use of the terms "women's" (*nisa'i*) and "feminist" (*naswi*) and their repercussions in the work of associations, movements, and organizations active in the field.

This chapter proposes several major arguments: First, since the beginning of the twentieth century, Palestinian men have prescribed the nature and limits of Palestinian women's activities within women's organizations. Women were called upon to join in national activity in fraught periods of Palestinian history, and then asked to step down and limit their activism to social and educational work in periods of national and political calm. Second, these organizations were not successfully transformed into social movements led by both women and men, and do not serve both women and men. Third, most Palestinian women's or feminist public discourse has embraced messages and action plans that have helped it to integrate into, and work within, the prevalent societal structures, and may thus be considered evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Fourth, the goals of Palestinian women's movements revolve around the provision of material,

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cultural, or consultative services to women and their children, while the goals of feminist movements strive to realize gender equality in society.

This chapter focuses on the work of feminists in Palestinian civil society rather than political parties or women's political bodies that were established within parties. The work of the latter has not yet been examined in a detailed way and merits an article in itself. Further, the dynamics of feminist work and struggle within the parties and in political frameworks differ from the dynamics within civil society organizations.

It is impossible to study women's movements and feminist movements in isolation from the political, social, and economic developments in the same community during the same period. There is a dialectical relationship between the phase through which any state passes, the changes experienced in society, and the situation of women in these contexts. A proper study of the status of women in any society should therefore entail studying the impact of the mutual intersections between three elements—state, society, and women—and the responses of each to the effects of the other two.

In the context of the Arab world, there were always women leaders and pioneers in areas considered to be the exclusive domain of men, but they always worked alone, as individuals (al-Haydari, 2003; Mernissi, 2000). The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha in Egypt is considered the beginning of the feminist movement in the Arab world and of activism by women as an organized social group, striving to change its status in a manner comparable to activism among men. Muhammad Ali's ideas contributed to changing the status of Egyptian women by encouraging educational and professional institutions to help women move into the intellectual, professional, and religious elites. Ali succeeded in introducing debates that effected change, modernization, and gender equality. This also contributed to the study of the status of women in the Egyptian family and in the Arab world (Abu Zayd, 2007).

A history of the Palestinian feminist movement: Social activism vs. political activism for Palestinian women

Palestinian women have been active in the private and the public spheres, depending on how national events unfolded in Palestine. (Jad, 2000). Yaqub (2003) dates the first public activism of Palestinian women to 1893, when Palestinian women emerged in Jaffa to protest the establishment of the first Jewish settlement in Palestine. The first women's association, known as the Orthodox Women's Association (Jammal, 1985) or by other accounts the Orthodox Poor Relief Society (Yaqub, 2003), was founded in Acre in 1904. This was followed by the establishment of a branch of the same society in Jerusalem in 1906, until the demise of the two associations in 1916 because of World War I. In 1910, the Association for the Support of Orthodox Orphans was founded in Jaffa for the rehabilitation and education of orphan girls of all religions.

In 1917, 200 Palestinian women from the Marj ibn `Amer region demonstrated against the Balfour Declaration, which expressed British support for establishing a national home for the Jews in Palestine. The political change resulting from the Balfour Declaration led to the establishment of women's associations and organizations active in raising women's political consciousness and in social reform (Yaqub, 2013). The Women's Union was set up in Jerusalem in 1921 by upper-class women, and Nabiha Nasir founded the Birzeit School (in Birzeit) in 1929, thus affecting the educational scene for boys and girls in the region.

Also in 1929, women took part in the al-Buraq Uprising, during which nine of them were killed. A women's conference was convened in Jerusalem on October 29, 1929 and attended by about 300 women from all parts of Palestine. The conference discussed the national cause and called for the support of the positions, decisions, and activities of the Palestinian Executive Committee. A sub-committee of women met with the British High Commissioner in his headquarters to deliver the conference resolutions to him. Upon their return, all the women drove

by car to the foreign consulates and sounded their horns in order to voice their complaints and demands (Abu-Baker, 1998). An Arab Women's Executive Committee (AWEC) was subsequently elected to implement and administer the conference's resolutions (Fleischmann, 2000). The women considered this conference to be the launching point for the establishment of the Palestinian women's movement. Among the stated objectives of the conference were the issue of gender equality; the encouragement of free trade and industry; the propagation of Arab culture in Palestine; and the establishment of contact with the women's movements in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. Fleischmann points to the women's high level of organization and experience in political and social work and attributes it to the fact that most of the activists were the daughters, sisters, or wives of Palestinian intellectual, cultural, nationalist, and economic leaders, from both Muslim and Christian families, who were well aware of the women's movement and helped to shape it.

The next mass women's action was a conference in Jerusalem in 1936, attended by 400 women. One week later, a similar women's conference was held in Jaffa calling for the support of the general strike and the boycott of Jewish goods.

After the succession of national crises over Palestine, gender discourse was relatively silenced and the national/political discourse dominated women's activism. Branches of the Palestinian women's movement spread from Jerusalem to Acre, Gaza, Jaffa, Haifa, Nablus, Nazareth, and Ramleh. The Jerusalem branch served as the center of activity and the headquarters of the movement. There were attempts by men to assert control over the activities of the women's movement and the disbursal of funds collected to support the national effort—as happened in Nablus, for example. The movement announced that it would be restricted to women only, and no men would be admitted as members (Fleischmann, 2000).

This patriarchal trend was not only reflected in men's treatment of activist women, but also in elite urban women activists' attitudes toward peasant

women. Fleischmann (2000) indicates that peasant women were not invited to join the movement; rather urban women activists sufficed to listen to the problems of peasant women and to give them advice on how to improve their own and their children's situations. Rosemary Sayigh (1980) describes the Palestinian feminist movement as being composed of "personalities," or elite women, and "peasants." Unlike Fleischmann, Sayigh and al-Khalili confirm that Palestinian peasant women did participate in nationalist and women's activities, though they did not take part in ideological discussions or attend meetings or conferences. Instead, their role was in working directly in the field, participating in demonstrations, transferring weapons, and providing services to combatants (al-Khalili, 1981; Sayigh, 1980), as well as actively participating in armed activity (Yaqub, 2013).

A history of networking and cooperation, locally and in the Arab world

A rift in the Palestinian women's movement opened in 1938 as a result of the establishment of two movements: the Arab Women's Association (AWA) and the Arab Women's Union (AWU). There is a claim that this split reflected the tension that existed between the two rival national factions, the Husaynis and the Nashashibis, transposed onto the realm of women's activities. Another explanation asserts that the dispute was the result of debates over the movement's plan of action and its goals: Was it to be more nationalist or more feminist? There is a third view that contends that the rift developed because of the debate over expectations of the Arab woman: Was she to preserve her traditional way of life, goals, and clothing, or turn more toward the West? It so happened that the AWU, affiliated with the Husayni faction, became the more politically active of the two groups. Despite all this, any appearance of hostility between the two conflicting groups was avoided, at least in the public sphere, where women continued to work together (Fleischmann, 2000).

As for the development of relations between the Palestinian women's

movement and Arab women's movements, there is extensive documentation of the active involvement of Palestinian women in both private visits and as delegates to general Arab conferences in the Arab world, and in Egypt in particular, for which they received the blessings of the male leadership. Asfour (2000) mentions that Izz al-Din al-Qassam sent a delegation of women, including his daughter, to Hoda Sha'rawi, the president of the Egyptian Women's Union. This delegation requested that Arab women take action to stop the collusion between the British Mandate and Jewish settlement in Palestine. Palestinian women succeeded in convincing the Egyptian Union to raise the issue of the political injustice facing Palestinians during a conference held in Cairo in 1938 in support of the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian delegation included 27 women from among the cultural and social elite. The conference brought together, in addition to the Palestinian and Egyptian women, delegations of women from Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Through it, the Palestinian women succeeded in raising Arab and global attention to the question of Palestine and the danger of Jewish settlement there. Asfour (2000) claims that the conference laid the foundation for the Arab feminist movement as the first nationalist gathering of Arab women. In 1944, the first conference of the General Union of Arab Women was held in Cairo and sought to examine the situation in Palestine (see Abla Abu Abla in al-Jazeera, 2004).

The suppression of the Palestinian Revolt in 1939 led to the decline of the Palestinian national movement and with this the goals of the women's movement's activism changed from political to social. The women's movement set up health clinics and schools for girls, launched sporting activities and clubs to promote literacy, and worked to strengthen its relations with women's movements in the Arab world.

When the conflict between the Palestinians and the Zionist movement escalated, however, women returned to national and political activity. In this period, the leadership of the women's movement became institutionalized and they marched in support of the demands of the male leadership. The

movement supported the medical and material needs of combatants and considered the postponement of gender demands one of the necessities of national political action—a consideration influenced by the demands of the male leadership (Fleischmann, 2000).

With the Nakba of 1948 and the massive displacement that accompanied it, the Palestinian leadership, both male and female, was dispersed and scattered widely. Women activists were now occupied with providing for their families, struggling as refugees and for survival. The nature of activity thus moved from the public sphere to the private sphere of the family (Fleischmann, 2000).

The Palestinian Feminist Movement in Israel after 1948

After the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948, the first institutionalized activity within a framework specifically for Palestinian women came from the Movement of Progressive Women. This movement worked immediately after the state began to provide social services to internal refugees (see “The Internally Displaced Palestinians in Israel” in *Volume I*) and then to provide educational and welfare services and political education for women. Also in 1948, the Women’s Renaissance (*Nahda*) Association was established and worked to recruit women for demonstrations against the military rule imposed on Palestinian residents of Israel immediately after the state’s establishment. In 1951, the Association was merged with the Movement of Progressive Women to form the Democratic Women’s Movement, which continues to work within Israel and whose members include both Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel (Abu-Baker, 1998).

The second framework for Palestinian women established within Israel was the Acre Women’s Association in 1976. This and other associations worked to provide for the cultural, educational, and social needs that the state failed to meet for the Palestinian community within Israel. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a significant revival in the establishment of

women's organizations, movements, and associations that seek to provide the abovementioned services. Foreign, Arab, and Palestinian financial support that arrived from outside Israel contributed to encourage these organizations to institutionalize their work and to become professional and specialized. Subsequently, professionalization and specialization became the foundation upon which Palestinian civil society inside Israel was founded (Abu-Baker, 1998, 2003). An analysis of the nature of these organizations' activities indicates that some of them, such as Christian or Islamic associations, contributed to accentuating or reviving sectarian affiliation, and others, such as the groups that emerged from within Arab political parties or were implicitly or explicitly endorsed by them, contributed to developing political and nationalist affiliation.

Later, some of these cadres, movements, and associations began to network around a number of issues, including joint activity within a coalition of feminist and women's associations and movements to change the personal status law in 1995 and an initiative to prepare alternative documentation for the UN committee on the subject of human rights and the condition of women in lieu of that presented by Israel in 1997.¹

Abu-Al'assal (2006) sees that the strategy of working within this coalition reflected a lack of administrative coordination between the associations. The coalition, for example, failed to recruit all the groups to support its activities, as it failed to mobilize the field and to work to educate women about the importance of achieving a change in the personal status law. The party affiliation of activists played a key role in the success or failure to coordinate between organizations. In addition to local efforts to network, feminist and women's organizations have sought to network with their counterparts in the Arab world and exchange expertise, specialization, and support.

1. The documentation that was presented can be found here; The Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women in Israel. (2006). *NGO report: The status of Palestinian women citizens of Israel*. Retrieved from http://www.adalah.org/eng/intladvocacy/pal_women1.pdf on February 5, 2015.

The distinction between women's activism and feminist activism

In a research study of 18 associations and organizations active in the field conducted by Abu-Al`assal (2006), it was clear that some of the organizations defined themselves in their literature as feminist (such as the Association of Women against Violence, and Kayan-Feminist Organization), while others defined themselves as women's organizations (such as the Childhood Center or the Acre Women's Association). There was a third group of associations and organizations that did not define themselves by a specific label (such as the National Emergency Helpline for Victims of Sexual Assault, the Association for the Advancement of Arab Women's Culture in the South, the Sidreh Association, and the Women's Association of Ara and Arara).

Some women's associations and movements, such as the Sidreh Association or the Lakiya Women's Association, work to empower women economically by teaching them a trade in order to enable them to provide for themselves and their families. Other groups, such as the Acre Women's Association or the Childhood Center, provide services for a fee while others, like the Association of Women against Violence or Kayan, provide free educational, welfare, and social work services. In looking at the nature of the services and their content, all of these groups work to raise women's awareness and to provide opportunities for them to have access to education or paying work (see also Abduh, 2008).

A number of activities for Palestinian women in Israel, such as the Democratic Women's Association, the National Hotline, or the Nisan Association, began as joint Jewish-Palestinian initiatives. Political and ideological differences, on the one hand, and differences between the needs of Jewish and Palestinian women, on the other hand, led the Palestinian branches of these feminist and women's groups to become specialized in the provision of services to Palestinian women (in Israel) only.

Feminist and women's discourse

The prevalent vocabulary of the Palestinian feminist movement, such as 'empowerment,' 'raising awareness,' and 'power relations,' describes the activities of feminist and women's groups. Although all the groups are based on the provision of services to women, only a small fraction of them define themselves as feminist. For example, Abu al-Asal (2006) emphasized that some of the feminist activists chose to define themselves as feminists in terms of their organizational identity, but took an approach of appeasement with regard to the public announcement of their general approach to the community within which they work. One association director stated to Abu al-Asal that she chooses to openly promote those of her organization's programs that find support within society, related to women's education and work, while engaging with issues such as "a woman's right to her body" quietly, because—in her view—society is not yet ready to accept this discourse. Another director of an association in the Naqab characterizes her work as "maneuvering": While the association's activities challenge the existing social structure, at the same time it refrains from advancing feminist slogans and trying to change existing customs and traditions, operating in a manner that she describes as "political," that is, based on manipulation and appeasement. Another organization described its activities to the public as being executed "in a feminist spirit" with the aim of being accepted by the widest public possible. Abu al-Asal (2006) explains this position as feminist organizations treating the feminist vision as a strategy and their approach to women in their work as a tactic.

Abu Hatoum (2013) describes the establishment of women's associations and movements as a process comprising two phases. The 1990s witnessed the establishment of women's organizations with a feminist political agenda, and their spread in the north and in the Naqab. These organizations called for breaking the silence toward violence in Palestinian society and the violence of the Israeli occupation. These organizations include Women Against Violence, the Childhood Center, the Nisan Association, Kayan,

the Lakiya Women's Association, al-Zahra, and the Association for the Advancement of Arab Women's Culture in the South. The second phase followed in the twenty-first century, with the establishment of organizations concerned with themes of gender identity and sexuality: such as the Gender Forum, Aswat—Palestinian Gay Women, and al-Qaws for Sexual and Gender Pluralism. In 2009, the Palestinian feminist organization al-Fanar was reactivated after years of dormancy. Al-Fanar was established in 1991 in Haifa and was active in a number of cities and villages. Al-Fanar linked social struggle, class feminism, and national struggle, and was among the first Palestinian and Arab feminist organizations to advocate against the crime of killing women. In 2012, a Palestinian Feminist Forum was announced, based in Haifa, with the aim of developing a Palestinian feminist movement working to advance Palestinian feminist thought and link feminist, social, and political issues. The forum aspires to realize life in a free society and to achieve social justice and equality among its members. This equality is inclusive of views on religion, class, gender, and sexual preference (*Bokra*, 2012).

The impact of feminist and women's organizations

Palestinian women's and feminist organizations are considered part of the structure of Palestinian civil society and a reflection of a specific national, political, economic, and social context (Jad, 2004). When Palestinian women in Israel try to improve their status, they face three obstacles: gender, as women in a patriarchal Arab society; class, because they are poorer and underemployed due to systemic political, economic, and social factors; and nationality, as members of a national minority within the state of Israel (Abdo, 2008; Abu-Baker, 1998; Najmi-Yusuf, 2012). Palestinian women's organizations in Israel were established as "resistance" to the oppression by men, to the ongoing abuse of classism in society, and to national oppression. These organizations generally operate as a reaction to the state's discriminatory policy toward Palestinian society, to the

policies of Jewish women's organizations toward Palestinian women, and to the repression from a male-dominated society. The majority of Palestinian organizations in Israel that define themselves, according to Abu al-Asal (2006) and Abdo (2008), as feminist or working from a feminist perspective, limit their activities to provision of services. They offer services to specific categories of women, not to the general public of women and certainly not to an audience of men. Thus, for example, they offer services for children, mothers, victims of violence, or lesbians. Examining the activities of each feminist or women's organization on its own, the concentration of service-related activities becomes clear: lectures, workshops, kindergartens, shelters for girls, shelters for women, sex education, treatment for victims of sexual assault, and so on. The value of such services is significant when considering the beneficiaries, such as distressed girls or Palestinian lesbians, who might not be able to receive the same crucial services elsewhere.

Undoubtedly, these groups also contribute to raising public awareness around these issues and try to change society's opinion about them, especially with regard to awareness on the prevention of violence against women. Likewise, they seek to change laws to better serve the needs and specific conditions of Palestinian women in Israel. However, they have devoted all of their time to providing services. The positive side of service provision is that it has succeeded to meet the needs of women on the ground and raised their levels of culture, income, or psychological and social wellbeing. Those organizations that offer paid services are less expensive than those offered by Israeli Jewish organizations and also tailor their services to the culture and needs of Palestinian society. However, by focusing on providing these services to such a narrowed group of beneficiaries, these organizations have not engaged in public education on gender issues from a feminist perspective. While targeted beneficiaries are educated through receiving feminist services, there is no education of an audience outside of these particular beneficiaries. For example, the

general public does not know about the Beijing Conference in 1995,² the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),³ the UN resolutions on the rights of women and children,⁴ the ongoing debate as a result of the UN demands on signatory states, and the Arab world's position on these agreements. These are just some of the issues on which Palestinian feminist groups in Israel focus.

In analyzing the intellectual and ideological debate that took place in the beginning of the twentieth century on the subject of women's equality with men, we find that it was led by pioneering men and women. Meanwhile, the Palestinian intellectual leadership in Israel—with the exception of a narrow minority (see, for example, Halabi, 2012; Za`afri, 2003)—has not been mobilized to activate the debate within society. The majority of the political and party-based leadership on a national level has not adopted the issue of gender equality, whether in their ideological proposals or in their practices (Abu-Baker, 1998; Najmi-Yusuf, 2012). This leadership did not, for example, play a positive role in the debate over women's representation in the Higher Follow-up Committee (see "The Higher Follow-up Committee for the Arab Citizens in Israel" in *Volume I*); Instead of facilitating the process of women's participation as part of the community leadership with a particular ideological position, decision-making was left in the hands of the traditional leadership. Women activists thus established a Coalition of Associations for Women's Representation in the Higher Follow-up Committee and the energies of feminist groups were spent debating their right to have their voice heard as representative leaders in local politics. Comparing this situation to the positions of Sa'd Zaghlul and other nationalist leaders in the 1920s, we find that genuine support on the ground for the feminist movement from the Palestinian

2. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, approved in September 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women, is a global commitment to achieving equality, development, and peace for women worldwide.

3. CEDAW is an expert body established in 1982 and is composed of 23 experts on women's issues from around the world.

4. These resolutions concern such issues as equal rights, trafficking, rights of education and wellbeing, etc.

party and political leaders is lacking. This does not mean that some of the male leaders are not feminists. However, the strategy of this leadership is to be cautious about public expression of feminist thought and its practice in daily life.

As NGOs, feminist organizations in Israel, Palestine, and the Arab world receive funding and support, both professional and ideological, from foreign donors (Jad, 2004). This leads to accusations that these organizations' proposals are foreign to Arab values and to the national agenda (al-Muzayin, 2010; Muhammad, 2012; Nazzal, 2005). Their goals are described as "Westernization" and seen as "colluding with Zionist and foreign intellectual colonialism" in its plan to change the underlying Islamic values of Arab society and the traditional foundations of the Arab family (see, for example, Muhammad, 2012; Samara, 2006). These allegations are the same that Arab feminists were charged within the Arab world at the beginning of the twentieth century (Abu-Baker, 2001).

Likewise, the debate in the wider Arab world has had an impact on local Palestinian feminist debate on the redistribution of roles between the sexes, with regard to relations in the family and in society in various fields. Accordingly, debates over religious attitudes toward feminist thought and feminist attitudes toward religious thought are inevitable. Notably, the Arab and Islamic world reached a compromise in the 1990s regarding the development and adoption of Islamic feminist thought as a reference point for social change (Abd al-Wahhab, 1999; al-Muzayin, 2010). This approach is compatible with cultural sensitivities and respects them, but at the same time it gives rise to three structural problems in feminist thought. First, it rejects changing any social arrangement Islam approves of, such as men's guardianship of women or the unacceptability of homosexual relationships, and sometimes even shuts down debate about them. The second problem is the imposition of Islamic religious discourse over Christian or Druze activists. The third problem is the charge "infidel" (*takefir*) being leveled at types of "other" feminist thought that do not adopt

Islamic dogma.⁵ Upon reflection, we find that all these problems touch on the essence of feminist ideological activity for Palestinian feminists in Israel as well.

Summary and conclusion

This study can be summarized in six key points:

1. Most Palestinian feminist organizations in Israel have not described themselves expressly as feminist in order to “adapt to” or “cope with” the situation on the ground and in an attempt to “achieve change surreptitiously.” As it is in the interest of women to accomplish the desired change, they have tried to demand that their conditions and social status improve using the variety of techniques and approaches available to them at the time.
2. Most Palestinian women’s organizations in Israel can be described as service provision organizations, not revolutionary intellectual movements working with revolutionary tools. This description does not carry a negative judgment of the tools that these groups use, but is simply an assessment of the situation as it exists on the ground.
3. The activity of the feminist movement in the Arab world has been characterized, since the beginning of the twentieth century, by the impact of the dynamics of the prevailing national and political situation. Arab men encouraged women to take mass action in the public sphere when it served the national agenda and limited their activities when the political climate changed. It was during these periods that women returned their attention to social activism. In analyzing Palestinian civil society within Israel, we find that feminist activism is restricted to educational and welfare services, and activism that is described as “traditionally the preserve of women.” Other groups provide political,

5. See, for example, *Alettejah*. (2013, March 8). Muslim religious scholars’ condemnation of feminist activism in the Arab world. Retrieved from alettejah.net/news/5092 on August 5, 2013.

legal, and general medical services, activities that are “traditionally male” (regardless of whether some also engage women).

4. The Palestinian feminist movement in Israel has failed to recruit Palestinian men to their cause. Thus, the activism of these organizations has not transformed into an influential, comprehensive community movement.
5. Most Palestinian feminist and women's groups in Israel have not devoted themselves to the matter of public education on gender issues from a feminist understanding, instead limiting their efforts to a restricted subgroup of women.
6. Too often, Islam and Arab traditions are relied upon as references for individual behavior and social harmony. A number of feminist and women's associations and organizations fall within this constellation, whether by remaining within the realm of what is acceptable in terms of subjects of community discussion or by reinterpreting the religious and social constitution and adopting it. As for those organizations that do not work within this framework, their work is limited to narrow sectors within the major cities.

Finally, there is no empirical study examining the public attitudes of Palestinian citizens of Israel, women and men, toward Palestinian feminist and women's movements, associations, and organizations or the extent of their knowledge about their services. Such a study would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the extent of the impact of these groups in Palestinian society.

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The Palestinian Women's Movement: Palestinian Feminism in Israel

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