



Female Arab faculty staff in the Israeli academy: Challenges and coping strategies

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ABSTRACT

This paper traced the paths of 14 Arab women who have managed to forge their way to senior teaching and administrative posts in the “ivory tower” of academic institutions; women who serve as models to empower future generations of Arab society in Israel. Qualitative methodology was chosen, employing semi-structured in-depth interviews to elicit testimony from female Arab academics concerning their socio-cultural experiences on their path towards and in their academic faculty posts. A deep observation of the challenges that these women encounter, reveals that although blocks to a career are encountered by more women in developing societies with a patriarchal structure, Arab women in Israel are excluded from academic career building in three dimensions: as women in Arab society, which restricts their appearance and advancement to senior posts in the public space, as members of a minority society largely excluded from the institutions of the majority society and as Arab minority women attempting to gain posts in Israeli academic institutions, which see themselves as serving the Jewish nation building project often to the detriment of Arab scholars. Thus “breaking the glass ceiling” involves a complicated and difficult struggle for Arab women who wish to gain academic posts in Israel. Those who succeed are able to reinforce their personal, professional and gender identity and empower their leadership and commitment to improving the status of Arab women, while often creating a hybrid identity.

1. Introduction

Human societies tend to define themselves according to different constructs such as: race, ethnicity, religion and gender (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2008; Toren, 2009). How gender is defined determines the organization of all social religious, economic political or other institutions and their activities (Fitzgerald, 2014; Longman and Madsen, 2014). The strict gendering of the woman’s role in society as mainly domestic and inferior has meant that, throughout the world, including Israel, women have a lower status in the workplace than men, expressed in a low rate of participation in the work market, less full-time job employment, slower promotion and lower wages (Longman and Madsen, 2014; Ensour et al., 2017; Toren, 2005, 2009). These characteristics also apply to women academics in general (Ali and Coate, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2014; Sandberg, 2013) and in developed societies in particular (Jalbout, 2015; Ensour et al., 2017). Thus, Oplatka and Lapidot (2012) noted that, in academia, men earn more than women, male promotion is faster and women invest less than men in education because they are expected to fulfill more social and homemaker duties. Increased access of women to Higher Education (HE) challenges the traditional composition of powerful political, economic, social and cultural structures (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Fitzgerald, 2014; Toren,

2009) and indicates the fracturing of accepted social norms (Jalbout, 2015; Sandberg, 2013; Ensour et al., 2017).

For this reason, many HE institutes resist the access of women to senior positions and even set blocks and obstacles to their advancement. In Israel, in addition to these blocks to women, Arab women wishing to attain posts in academic institutions must also contend with the perception that these institutions should serve the Jewish nation building project, a project that largely ignores the Arab minority (Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016). Additionally, Israeli government negligence of the infrastructure of Arab communities, including lack of industrial development and deficient transportation limits Arab women’s participation in the economy. Thus, too many places of employment require security clearance, which may be difficult for Arab women to obtain. Consequently, Arab women suffer from dual exclusion as women and as members of the Arab minority.

In Arab society today, patriarchy continues to reign supreme, so that the woman is still often perceived as subordinate to the man in the family and is largely excluded from the public sphere.

(Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016; Jalbout, 2015). For those Arab women, who are able to enter the Israeli academic world, this represents a significant change in their status, made possible by a gradual change in patriarchal norms towards more

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modern perceptions (Balas, 2017; Focs, 2018). The increased integration of Arab girls in education and their increased level of education (Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016) allows them to gain an almost equal status with Arab men. Studies investigating Arab women's opinions of HE in Israel indicate their belief that HE allows them to improve their social, educational and cultural status (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016; Ensour et al., 2017; Oplatka and Lapidot, 2012). However, to do this and to achieve equal rights, they have to cope with many blocks that hinder their integration set by the Israeli establishment (Arar, 2017; Jalbout, 2015; Modood and Khataab, 2015; Toren, 2009).

Although research has examined different aspects of the development of HE in Arab society in Israel (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016), as far as could be ascertained no research has yet been published on the Arab women who have managed to break into the ivory tower of academia and become faculty staff members despite cultural and institutional obstacles. Thus, this paper aims to examine how Arab women in Israel have forged their path into academic posts. More specifically, the paper tries to answer the following questions: (1) What encourages Arab women to aspire to faculty posts in the Israeli academic world? (2) What motivates Arab women to contend for senior faculty posts in Israeli academic institutions? (3) What challenges do they face in order to reach academic posts - and how do they cope with these difficulties? (4) What are the characteristics of those who have succeeded in attaining faculty posts in Israeli academic institutions?

This paper starts by reviewing literature on women's entry into HE faculties throughout the world which, until recently, were considered to be predominantly male domains. It then explores and discusses the appearance of this phenomenon in the local context in Israel.

Qualitative methodology was chosen for this investigation, employing a semi-structured in-depth interview with 14 Arab women who had succeeded in attaining faculty posts in academic institutions in Israel. The research findings present the women's narratives, using their testimony to present the insights which arose from the study.

2. Women in the academic world – Global experiences

In recent years, there has been much discussion concerning the underrepresentation of women in academic faculty staffs (Fitzgerald, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Toren, 2001, 2009). Throughout the academic world, women constitute the majority of students completing bachelor's and master's degrees, and also doctorates in certain disciplines; whereas the proportion of female graduates in academic staffs is far lower (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2008; Longman and Madsen, 2014; Toren, 2001, 2009). The reason for this is that, over many years, the doors of universities and academic colleges faculties have largely been closed to women (Diehl, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). However, the last thirty years have witnessed a revolutionary increase in female participation in HE staffs.

The most recent data on HE graduates show that by 2014, in the OECD states, women constituted 51% of those who received a bachelor's degree, 56% of those who received master's degrees and 52% of those receiving a doctorate (OECD Report: Education at a Glance, 2015). In Israel, over the 2010–2013 academic years, only 34% percent of new faculty hires at universities were women, and 45% at public colleges. This is particularly noteworthy because women already then constituted a majority of the Israelis who receive doctorates every year. However, a gradual rise in female academic staff over the last decade was noted in 2014. and by 2015, women constituted one third (29%) of all university lecturers (and 39% in all public colleges in Israel, which appear to be more amenable to accepting diverse populations) but only 15% of all senior university faculty and only 10% of the professors in academic colleges, while Arab women constituted just 0.4% of all tenured academic lecturers. According to the most recent CBS (2018), although the percentage of Arab students in HE institutions has reached 15%, only 1.25% of all lecturers are Arab, a finding which, *prima facie*

implies policies of exclusion and discrimination (see also Binstein et al., 2015; Council for Higher Education, 2018; Skop, 2014, 2015). The underrepresentation of Israeli women in academia is even more noticeable in certain disciplines such as sciences and technology, although recently women, including a few Arab women, have dared to enter these disciplines, and in computer science programs across Israel, women accounted for 29% of all senior faculty staff in 2016 (Levi, 2017).

In comparison, a recent study by the American Association of University Professors investigating the current role of women in HE examined 1445 colleges and universities, revealing that, while women earn more than half of all p.h.d. degrees granted to American citizens today, they still comprise only about 45% of tenure-track faculty, 31% of tenured faculty, and just 24% of full professorships in 2005–2006 (West and Curtis, 2006).

In MENA (states of the Middle East and North Africa), female Arab academics face resistance from their male counterparts due to cultural norms favoring men (Findlow, 2013), resulting in considerably higher unemployment for women graduates than for men. In some localities, and for certain types of academic degrees, over half of female p.h.d. graduates remain unemployed after a year's job search (World Bank, 2013). Recent studies point to a complex set of interrelated social, legal, and economic barriers holding Arab women back (Jalbout, 2015). However, students consistently rate female instructors lower than male peers and there is a perception that female scientists have to work harder to prove themselves even when they are more suitable for scientific work than their male counterparts (Toren, 2009). Comparatively, Jordanian women's participation rate in academic staff stood at 24% for the academic year 2013–2014 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016), which is higher than the international women's labor force participation rate of 16 per cent (World Bank, 2018). Nevertheless, women's representation diminishes in higher academic faculty ranks and they are underrepresented in managerial positions due to institutional discrimination and patriarchal norms (Ensour et al., 2017).

Recent research in various countries has studied the obstacles facing women's professional progress, and especially in the academic world, despite the implementation of policies promoting equality of opportunity for both sexes (Gofen, 2011; Modood, and Khataab, 2015; Jalbout, 2015; Toren, 2001, 2009). The concept of the "glass ceiling" is used to describe obstacles and covert discrimination, which are seemingly invisible but which, when reached, stop women's potential professional progress. In the context of the present study, this would relate to women's promotion to the senior ranks of the academic world (Gofen, 2011), a glass ceiling that often leads many women to abandon aspirations to attain senior faculty posts (Toren, 2009). This process is exacerbated by those women's need to more easily balance the competing demands of family and career and by the difficulties involved in coping with structural discrimination on an ethnic and gender basis (Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016; Modood, and Khataab, 2015; Toren, 2009).

3. Arab women in Israel's academia

Although proportionate representation at all levels of education is desirable, the Arab minority is seriously underrepresented in all Israeli HE faculties (Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016). The issue of the status of Arab women in Israel has been awarded significant research in recent years (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016; Gilat, 2015). The typical traditional patriarchal Arab family is hierarchically ordered according to age and gender, with the women as subordinate and dependent members. Cultural, religious and social norms in this and similar developing societies dictate a very strict gender distribution of distinct functions and areas of responsibility (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Arar et al., 2013; Ensour et al., 2017; Gilat, 2015), limiting women's work to the vicinity of their homes and restricting their economic capital. These home-making norms imposed on Arab women, even those with jobs, force many to choose part-time positions in "feminine"

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