Politics and Arab women mobilization in Israel
Articulation of a gender consciousness and a Palestinian identity

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gender consciousness
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Divided between a Palestinian identity, largely proclaimed, and a gender
consciousness, currently in the process of being reformulated, the political
citizenship of Arab or Palestinian women citizens of Israel must be apprehended
by taking into consideration this double referent of identity. The process of
formation of a “gendered”1 identity in this ethnic minority, already torn between
an Israeli citizenship and an Arab nationality, must not be underestimated.
Constituting today nearly 18% of the Israeli population, the Arab or Palestinian
citizens of Israel are regarded as second-class citizens. They thus undergo the
effects of a marginalization which has intensified since the beginning of the
second Intifada at the end of September 2000 and in particular since the death of
thirteen Arab citizens in October 2000, who had come to express their support
for the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories. There is thus an ever-increasing
rift between Jews and Arabs while the latter fully proclaim their Palestinian
identity. The identity construction of this minority has already been the subject
of many studies, like the study of Laurence Louër on their
“communautarization”.2 L. Louër highlights a double process: the assertion of a
Palestinian identity at the same time as a participation in the Israeli public life.
The Arab women citizens are concerned by this phenomenon, with the

* The author is preparing a PhD thesis in Political Science at the IEP of Paris. Grant
holder of the French Research Centre of Jerusalem. This article is partly based on
fieldwork carried out in May 2003, within the framework of the Comparative Political
Science DEA of the IEP of Aix-en-Provence, financed by a “monthly research salary” of
the FRCJ.

1 The term “gender” characterizes the social relationship between sexes. This
sociological concept makes it possible to separate biological differences between sexes to
prefer the socially built differences. This concept more systematically used in France
since the 1980’s was used beforehand in Anglo-Saxon research by Gender Studies. See

2 Laurence Louër, Les citoyens arabes d’Israël, Paris, Collection Voix et Regards,
Balland, 2003 (work extracted from her thesis in Political Science IEP Paris 2001)
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difference that they are marginalized from the public sphere and undergo a double discrimination as women, as a minority inside a minority. When these women decide to engage in the public sphere, and more particularly in politics, they undergo a process of stigmatization inherent in their double status of "militant" and "Palestinian". In other words, as Arab women in politics, they face obstacles related at the same time to the marginalization of Palestinians of Israel from the political institutions and to the persistence of patriarchal practices and values. This phenomenon sometimes qualified as neo-patriarchal must be understood as an articulation between the heritage of a discriminating male domination and its new forms and issues in a society known as modern and industrialized. More than an evolution of practices, it is about an articulation between discriminating practices that are traditional and those directly generated by the present society.

However, considering the limited participation of Arab women citizens in conventional politics (parties, elections, etc), it is necessary to note their massive mobilization in the associative field. Social, feminist, charitable associations and others must be regarded as real political scenes. This sphere of the politics as non conventional, in opposition to usually invested structures, is not a new phenomenon. Concerning the associations of Palestinian women, the first creations date from the beginning of the XXth century, in the form of charitable organizations. The conciliation of "gendered" and nationalist questions occurred in the Twenties with the creation of organizations of Palestinian women who intended to take part in the national fight, by disputing the Zionist establishments and the British Mandatory. Palestinian female associations still enjoy today a broad success in the populations of the Occupied Territories. Concerning associations of the Arab women citizens of Israel, the situation is somewhat different insofar as the creation of the Israeli State in 1948, and the submission of the Arabs to a military Government until 1966, largely destroyed the pre-existing organizations and led these Palestinians to a withdrawal on the private sphere, leading by the same occasion to a privatization of the political practices and expression. The Arab female associations in Israel then emerged in the Seventies, while the Israeli occupation of 1967 caused a nationalist revival among Palestinians in Israel. Today many associations of Arab women exist in Israel and articulate questions of gender and nation. In this sense, we can affirm

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3 See the CEDAW counter report The Status of Palestinian Women Citizens in Israel written by a group of NGO, the work Group on the status of the Palestinian women of Israel, in 1997, in criticism of the CEDAW official report presented by the Israeli authorities to the United Nations. See in particular the article of Nabila Espanioly, "Palestinian Women in Israel – ‘Herstory’", p.17-27.
that these organizations constitute political scenes, certainly unconventional, but no less influential, as acting on and accompanying social change.

The objective of this study is to understand the nature and the issues of the politicization of Arab or Palestinian women citizens of Israel. We thus think to shed light on the various conventional and unconventional political structures. This more largely raises the question of Arab women citizens' identity construction and the articulation of a gender consciousness and an ethnic belonging. Indeed, while being interested in the place and the role of Arab women in politics we raise the question of the identity articulation between a gender consciousness, an Arab nationality, the identification with the Palestinian people and an Israeli citizenship. All these identity components will be differently internalized and proclaimed. This debate is particularly relevant when one is interested in the relationship between feminism and nationalism. We quickly note that the Arab women militants - so much in the parties than associations - carry out two battles: one against the patriarchy of their community and another in favour of the Palestinian people. However conventional politics gives little place to women and gives priority to national questions. It is there that an analysis of the associative field is interesting to understand the political strategies of circumvention adopted by Arab women citizens. The analysis of Arab women militants' interviews, as well as information collected in parties and associations are used as a basis for this work. To understand the methods and the meaning of the political mobilization of the Arab women we will briefly analyse, initially, their places and their roles within the parties - in order to analyse the nature and the effects of a numerical and symbolic marginalization - then we will more particularly be interested in their involvement in the associative field as sphere of the unconventional politics.

Marginalization of Arab women citizens in the conventional political sphere

Marginalized from the various sectors of the Israeli society, Arab women citizens are also largely absent from the political sphere. Although officially enjoying the same civic and political rights as the Jews, the Arab citizens are however under-represented in the Knesset and in local councils. Only ten Arab deputies have sat in Parliament since the elections of January 2003. To date,
only one Arab woman, Husniya Jbara, was elected to the Knesset. This was between 1999 and 2003 on the list of the left-wing Zionist party Meretz. Nevertheless, Arab women militants can be found in various political formations, like the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Jabha or Hadash / Judaeo-Arab party inherited from the Communist Party), the Organization for Democratic Action (Da’ am / movement of Marxist obedience), the Patriotic Democratic Union (al-Tajammu’ al-Watani al-Dimuqrati / left-wing nationalist Arab party of Azmi Bishara), the Islamic Movement but also Zionist parties like Meretz, Am Ehad or the Labour Party.

Since the Eighties, Arab parties were created, independently of any bond of patronage with the great Zionist formations like Likud and the Labour Party. Breaking with a political tradition of co-optation, these new parties allowed a better expression of the Arab population’s expectations. The public assertion of a Palestinian identity was mainly promoted by these formations. Jabha, historical place of the political involvement of the Arab citizens, had to compete with other formations, like Tajammu’ and the Islamic Movement which both have deputies in the Knesset. Following the example of Arab men, the women who decide to enter politics primarily do so within mixed parties like Jabha or Arab parties like Tajammu’, even if that does not prevent some from preferring Zionist parties. Husniya Jbara has thus justified her presence in Meretz for more than fifteen years in two manners: first she specifies her adhesion to the ideological line of the party which preaches the equality between Jews and Arabs and defends the peace process, then she underlines the difficulties of an involvement in the Arab formations which are never invited to take part in

Barakeh (Hadash or Jabha), Issam Makhoul (Hadash), Ahmad al-Tibi (Balad ), Ayoub Kara (Likud), Majalli Whbee (Likud).

6 Let us note that on the 120 seats of the Israeli Parliament, only 18 are occupied today by women.

7 The Progressive List for Peace, resulting from the coalition of the Progressive Movement (directed by Mohammed Miari) and of the Jewish movement Alternativa (directed by Uri Avneri) was presented at the parliamentary elections of 1984. It disappeared in 1992. The Arab Democratic Party was created a short time before the elections of 1988 and is directed by a former Arab Labour deputy Abd al-Wahab Darawshé. At the time of the parliamentary elections, it is presented on a joint list with the Islamic Movement. The Arab Movement for Change directed by Ahmed al-Tibi was created in 1999. It was presented on a joint list with Tajammu’ for the elections of 1999, and with Jabha for the elections of January 2003. Tajammu’ was created in 1996 from the fusion of the Progressive Movement and part of Abna al-Balad (nationalist movement, whose activities are blocked by the Israeli authorities, which refuses to take part in the elections but enjoys a certain success in the committees of Arab students). For further details on these various political formations, refer to the work of Laurence Louër, op.cit.
governmental coalitions. In other words, to benefit from a minimum political influence in the Knesset and in the Government, it is necessary to belong to a Zionist party.

However the Arab women citizens involved in political parties remain very few. For Rim Natur, young Tajammu' women militant residing in Nazareth and having continued studies in France at the Sorbonne, women militants constitute "an elite. They have a university education and often have a social and economic condition higher than the average of the Palestinians in Israel. They also benefit from the influence of a family which was already very active." It is significant to note that the family remains an essential agent of political socialization as a vehicle of the traumatic Palestinian memory and bringing to women – with the involvement of a father, brother or husband – a respectable support for a possible political involvement. It should also be stressed that the university plays a considerable role in the politicization of Arab women. The female students meet the effects of acculturation there and often try out their first political actions. The Arab students Committee of the University of Haifa, until this year, was directed by Khulud Badawi, young member of Jabha. Let us note finally that these women militants are seldom religious and that they generally declare themselves atheistic. An exception exists however concerning women militants close to the Islamic Movement, but it should be stressed that they are far from numerous and that the majority are involved in charitable associations which claim to be part of this movement.

The marginalization of women on the national political scene: the case of the parliamentary elections of January 2003.

The parliamentary elections of January 2003 can be analysed in comparison with the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling", namely a perverse situation of apparent promotion of women. During the election campaign several women candidates were presented on lists. In spite of that, they could not impose their ideas, nor even be elected.

In Jabha, Taghrid Shabita occupied the fifth place and thus did not have any chance to be elected, the party having obtained in 2003 only three seats as in

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8 Interview May 2003 Kfar Sheba
9 Interview May 2003 Nazareth
10 ILO, International Labour Organization, defines this expression as "the invisible barriers created by behavioural and organisational prejudices which prevent women from reaching the highest responsibilities". The expression comes from a group of American researchers who studied in 1987 the question of the particular obstacles which women have to face and published the work: Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can women reach the top of America's largest corporations? Ann Morrison, Ellen Van Vel Sor and Randall White, Boston, MA, Addison-Wesley Longman Inc. 1987.
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1999. Khulud Badawi was relegated to the eleventh place because of an alliance of the party with the Arab movement of Ahmed al-Tibi, and does not deprive herself of criticizing these practices which are only façades of democratization. It is there that the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling" is most manifest since the leaders remain men, women obtaining only secondary places. It is very difficult for them to reach more realistic positions to be elected. In Tajammu' party, the situation is roughly the same. Afnan Agbariya, the only woman of the top 10, preferred the fourth place to the third. Actually another woman militant entrusted to us that negotiations and blackmails had taken place before the elections when Wassil Taha, in the third place, threatened to leave the party with all his supports if this place were withdrawn from him11. In addition a woman made her entry on the United Arab List. Ruqaya Bayadsi - a veiled Moslem woman of about sixty - belongs to a family that is well-known and close to the Islamic Movement in the Triangle. Moreover she is very involved in the associative field in Baqa al Gharbiya. The only list to be led by an Arab woman citizen, the young Marxist woman militant Asma Egbarieh, is that of Da' am. The party had already been led by an Arab woman in 1999, Samia Khatib. As for Husniya Jbara, in tenth position on the list of Meretz and elected deputy between 1999 and 2003, she was not re-elected, her party obtaining only six seats in 2003 contrary to ten in 1999.

In addition to a numerical marginalization, Arab women citizens are subjected to a symbolic marginalization because of the quasi inexistence of questions concerning them in the political programs. Besides some very vague slogans as in Jabha or in Am Ehad on the equality men/women, no party proposed a coherent female agenda. The principal reason given by the leaders of the parties and certain women militants is the priority given to questions concerning the Palestinians. If the "gendered" agendas are insufficient it is above all because the men, who rule, are not made aware of these questions and because the members, in a general way, identify other priorities: the interests of the Palestinian people, without distinction between sexes. To propose a feminist program is not federator and particularly risky for the parties which aim at gathering the Arab electorate. Arin Awari, feminist militant in Tajammu' affirms to make the distinction between her feminism and her nationalism, even if in general she fights for both. During the election campaign, she chose not to put forward non-consensual feminist ideas for fear of being detrimental to her party.

11 Interview May 2003 Nazareth
12 Interview May 2003 Kfar Qar‘a (Triangle). Arin Awari is director of the feminist Judaeo-Arab organization Women School for Women.
The issues and obstacles of a local political involvement

The local political level has been a little more open to the political participation of Arab women citizens. Local elections take place every four years and in two times: direct uninominal election of the mayor or head of the local council (since the 1988 law) and election with a system of proportional list for the members of the town councils and local councils. Let us note that local politics holds a central place in the public life of the Arab citizens who can directly manage their business. In this sense, women must be represented there to be able to influence the public affairs of the Arab population. Two women were elected in the last local elections in October 2003, on the list of Jabha, in Nazareth and Ilabon (Galilee). That changes to fourteen the number of Arab women to have sat in a local or municipal council. The participation of women in local politics is a subject discussed in Arab cities. But, in the same manner as at the national level, there are very few women seen on the lists, and when they are on them, they are relegated to ineligible places. Because of the coalitions and in particular of the electoral vote-catching, they do not have any chance to be elected, even if one can only note the rise in their level of study, their rising consciousness about political questions and their increased mobilization in social movements. Moreover, the local level poses additional problems to women, because of particularly long-lived clan logics. The political vote-catching is not a phenomenon peculiar to the local level and the national elections themselves know their share of financial scandals and other electoral frauds. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the second Intifada, the national level has not ceased losing interest in the eyes of Arab citizens who see there no issue of political change and always the same discriminating Jewish domination. The only political level where the Arab citizens can be influential thus remains the local level which functions primarily on clan logics. The political affiliation of the candidate is not the priority in a system which privileges the representation of Hamoula or 'A' ila ("family" in Arabic) within the meaning of a widened family

13 According to our calculations, only eight women out of fourteen were elected, including four before 1998: Samia Hatib in Nazareth, Nahida Shahadeh in Kfar Yasif, Fathina Hana in Kfar Kama and Jihad Jabarin in Umm al Fahm. Five have sat in interim since 1998 and Violet Khoury, mayor of Kfar Yasif between 1972 and 1973, had been named to replace her husband. Also let us note that the majority of them are Christian and it would thus be interesting to develop research on the relationship between religious parameter and political involvement.

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or a clan. 15 The women are thus never selected to compete for a position of mayor and seldom for functions of city council member. They are not heads of clans or families likely to negotiate, to even haggle over, political votes and supports.

Associative involvement: an alternate scene of political involvement for Arab women citizens of Israel

To tackle the question of the politicization of Arab women in Israel, it is particularly important to deconstruct the traditional division which is made between public sphere and private sphere. This division amounts to denying the place of the politics within the family unit and more largely within what is called the "civil society". Even if this last term is criticized today for its lack of precision or its nonsense, it makes it possible to roughly qualify all that would not belong to the public sphere and therefore to the conventional political field. As Joseph Suad could note in a work devoted to women citizenship in the Middle East 16, the distinction private/public must be replaced by an approach in three dimensions: the public sphere, civil society and the domestic sphere. Politics is present in these three fields but differs by its nature and its issues. Since we could note the weak presence of Arab women within the parties and their marginalization from the institutions and even from the political debates, it is essential, now, to look into the associative field.

The associative world in Israel is at the same time a political agent of socialization and a political arena of expression in itself. In addition, it can be employed as complement or substitute to an involvement in a party. Many Arab women thus decide to be committed in feminist and/or social movements to achieve a pragmatic action which they cannot take on the conventional political scene. It is interesting to note that many political women militants choose such a mobilization after having tasted the opportunities offered by the parties. Weary of obstacles met on the political scene known as conventional, they complete or substitute their involvement by a social mobilization. But one should not be mistaken there, this mobilization is as much political, they are simply more at ease to articulate their gender consciousness and their Palestinian nationalism. One cannot separate the social from the politics, especially when feminism is related to nationalism. Let us note in addition that Bedouin women in the Negev have created social female associations whereas they do not engage in parties.

16 Joseph Suad, Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East, Syracuse NY, Syracuse University Press, 1999.
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The recourse to the associative field can be an alternative to the conventional political scene. Their mobilization, by attacking the patriarchy of their community while defending their Palestinian Bedouin culture, is incontestably political. In other words, the involvement in the associative field can be at the same time a complement and a substitute to an involvement in the conventional political system.

Associative involvement is very widespread among Arab women citizens of Israel, as it is besides among Palestinian women of the West Bank and Gaza. They were very early constituted in groups of women. The Arab Palestinian Women’s Union was created in 1921 and the first conference of the Palestinian women has taken place in 1929 in Jerusalem. But the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 in particular had as a consequence the spatial scattering of the Palestinian people. The Palestinians who became citizens of the State of Israel remained under military government until 1966. It is only in 1967, with the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories, that they renewed the contact which marked their political and nationalist awakening. Women started again to organize and carry out social actions. The Seventies saw the creation of the first associations of Palestinian women in Israel. In 1973, Arab women militants and students created an association in Acre which will lead to Dar e-Tifl el Arabi, an experimental centre on the Arab schools. Similar initiatives were developed in Haifa, Nazareth and Jaffa. Some social or charitable organizations of Arab women are very famous today: Al Tufula (directed by Nabila Espanioly - Nazareth), Women Against Violence (directed by Aida Tuma Sulaiman - Nazareth), Al Siwar (Movement of support for women victims of sexual abuse - Haifa), the Arab Women Association of Acre (educational centre for women directed by Mariam Mar'i) or Women of Lagiya (Bedouin Women Association). Cultural movements also play an essential role as political arena of expression. The Association of Arab culture in Nazareth, for example, directed by Rahuda Bishara is a place of promotion of the Palestinian culture and history. Visits are thus organized on the ruins of Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948 in Galilee. Readings of poems, songs and Palestinian folklore are also proposed to a young and broad public. All these associations do not content themselves with proposing a female agenda, they are also critical towards the Israeli policy as concerns the Palestinians.

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18 Sister of Azmi Bishara, leader of Tajammu'.
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A political sphere where gender consciousness and Palestinian identity are articulated

The leaders of Arab women associations in Israel are defined today as Arab or Palestinian women citizens of Israel. The female gender is thus interlinked with their ethnic belonging. They refuse to distinguish the two identities and claim to carry out two fights simultaneously: one at the sides of the men of their community against the injustices created and maintained by the Israeli State in its Jewishness, the other against the patriarchy of the Israeli society as a whole and the Arab community in particular. In this sense, feminism is related to the Palestinian fight.

However, this concordance of fights does not go back to the first movements of Palestinian women who, for the majority, focused their attention on national questions. Palestinian resistance to the British presence and the Zionist establishments dealt exclusively with the nationalist combat. The various mobilizations of women who took place as of the end of the XIXth century were held alongside men. The first conference of Palestinian women in 1929 in Jerusalem aimed at signifying the solidarity of women with nationalist militants. They thus started to be mobilized against the threats which weighed on their society. Palestinian nationalism as a movement of independence did only little place to the considerations of gender and women did not seek to dispute it. Educated urban women from middle or higher class played a key role in the development of charitable female associations. Rural women also played a considerable role in the national fight, while in particular bringing a practical assistance to resistance fighters and sometimes joining the acts of sabotage against Zionist establishments. This urban/rural distinction still prevailed in the Seventies where in some Palestinian cities social actions developed for the refugees who were poor and whose lands had been expropriated. The national liberation thus remained the central and immediate topic. The occupation of the Palestinian Territories in 1967 and the continuation of the Zionist process of colonization even more incited women to take part in these social organizations. These movements in particular started to be institutionalized with the creation of local female branches of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The questions of gender, like those of social class, still remained secondary while social actions of greater scale were organized among urban and rural populations. It was necessary, however, to wait for the first Intifada (1987-1993) for the increased role of women, in particular in the popular committees, so that "gendered" agendas could be developed. The massive involvement of Palestinian women in the popular uprising took various forms: organization of women demonstrations, collection of clothing and food, guards in front of the units of resistance, acts of resistance, etc. Many researches undertaken over this period attest today to the close link between the massive participation of women and the social change
generated by this first Intifada\textsuperscript{19}. However at the same time, and more particularly in Gaza, the mobilized women were victims of aggression by Moslem fundamentalists notifying them their lack of respectability in thus flaunting themselves on the public place and often unveiled. Therefore, whereas the Intifada was the occasion of a female involvement in the public sphere, the conservative discriminations to which they could be subjected resulted in awakening their consciousness about the injustices inherent in their own Palestinian society. If resistance to the Israeli presence and the assistance to victims remain the first objective of female social associations, they no longer hesitate today to denounce the inequalities of gender as well as violence made to women.

The ideological and temporal concordance of fights is also significant for Arab women militants in Israel. But, in the same way as Palestinian women of the Territories, and perhaps in an even more exacerbated way, nationalism marginalized the "gendered" questions. The military government, which was established until 1966, and their status of minority within the Israeli State led to a withdrawal into the domestic sphere, and consequently to a reinforced assignment of the women to the family unit. As Nabila Espanioly underlines: "The increasing participation of Palestinian women in public, social, and political activities stopped short as a result of the 1948 war, especially among those women who remained within the new State of Israel (...) Palestinians in Israel were isolated from other Arabs and segregated from Jews by military laws which controlled their daily lives (...) Having lost control over his land and status, the Palestinian man was left in control of only one domain: his family, his wife, and his children. In particular, the concept of Ard (Honor) acquired new importance and meaning in light of men’s fears and their sense of powerlessness"\textsuperscript{20}. It will thus be necessary to await the Seventies and the creation of first Arab female associations so that women integrate the public sphere. "Gendered" agendas then started to be developed in associations of support for women victims of violence and initiatives aiming at their empowerment: literacy classes, nurseries for children, assistance to the female workers, etc. If specific questions for women then started to gain visibility, the national fight however lost centrality. Still today, these women militants intend


\textsuperscript{20} Article of Nabila Espanioly in The Status of Palestinian Women Citizens in Israel, \textit{op.cit.} p.21
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to reconcile feminism and nationalism. Thus Areen Awari, a Tajammu’ woman militant and director of the Judaeo-Arab organization Women School for Women in Kfar Qari’a, stressed that "there are two means of liberation: feminism and nationalism. I am against the men who criticize the State of Israel but discriminate their wives. We have two fights to carry out, one against the State of Israel and one against the patriarchy. For me feminism is a feeling not an ideology. Nabila Espanioly, close to Jabha, director of Al Tufila centre in Nazareth and a Palestinian feminist figure in Israel, also explains: "I carry out two fights and I am thus rejected by the Palestinian men because I speak to them about women and I am rejected by the Jewish community because I am Palestinian and they see me like a threat. (…) If you have humanistic values you cannot divide the fights. All is connected. It is necessary to speak about all the problems." 22

However, this combat is not an easy thing for the Arab or Palestinian women citizens of Israel who are prone to stigmatizations. We wish to be interested here in the difficulties encountered by some women militants, because of their Israeli citizenship. A precise example comes to support our analysis. It is about an experiment lived by the Movement of Democratic Women of Israel - officially created under the name of TANDI in 1951. This organization is actually an abstract body of the Communist Party and today of Jabha, composed of Jews and Arabs. Since 1949 this organization has become member of the International Democratic Federation of Women (international communist feminist organization). Until the creation of the first Arab female associations in the Seventies, this movement remained the only organization to function like a feminist association by gathering Jewish and Arab women militants. However the participation of this mixed movement posed many problems in international conferences. The movement clearly declares its vocation not to represent the Israeli State but the Jewish and Arab democratic women of Israel. This ambition remained for a long time misunderstood by Zionists and other women representing the Arab countries which, on several occasions, boycotted the meetings. Samira Khoury, founder of TANDI, thus explains that the representatives of the movement (a Jewish woman citizen and an Arab one) were regarded as traitors. In an international meeting in Copenhagen in 1974, the movement was represented by two Jewish women citizens and two Arab Israeli women. A Zionist lobby tried to prevent the Jewish and Arab Israeli women from speaking while the representatives of various Arab countries left the room of conference. On one side or the other, nobody understood that Jewish and Palestinian women of Israeli citizenship could speak jointly. More recently still,

21 Interview May 2003 Kfar Qari’a (Triangle)
22 Interview May 2003 Nazareth.
when the International Federation decided to change the mode of designation of the representatives, by establishing five geographical areas, the Arab women militants opposed the integration of Israel, and thus of the movement representatives, in the Middle East zone. The perception of oneself by others is here deeply destabilizing for the Arab women citizens who are actually between two "labellings".

The Arab women associations as acting and accompanying the social change

For more than fifty years the evolution of the Israeli and Palestinian societies has led to deep social and cultural changes. The expropriation of Palestinian lands and the economic difficulties resulting from it incited the Arab citizens to work for Israeli industry and services. Their entry on the Israeli labour market was accompanied by a redefinition of the social relationship in the Palestinian society. Men were then more absent from the family unit and some women were forced to find a job to mitigate the economic difficulties of their household. While a process of urbanization developed, the law on the obligatory and universal schooling of 1949 also led to the massive schooling of the Palestinian children of Israel. All this contributed then to deep social upheavals and a revaluation of the gender relationship, while the Palestinian national fight required an involvement of everybody. Arab women in Israel then massively penetrated the public sphere and associations which they created still function today as accompanying and acting the social change.

Accompanying the social change, these associations do so by the specific assistance which they bring in response to the social, economic and political upheavals having occurred in the Israeli and Palestinian societies. And this is all the more topical considering the fact that the occupation of the Palestinian Territories continues - leading to an impoverishment of the Palestinian society - and that Israel is living today one of its most serious socio-economic and political crises. These female associations thus work with the improvement of the living conditions of the Palestinians of Israel and the Occupied Territories. They also open with questions recently and massively “problematised” like polygamy, marital violence or the financial independence of women. They also help Arab women to adapt to the social change. Thus, in the 1990, Bedouin women settled in planned cities were given lessons in use of the electric household appliances which they had just acquired in their new houses. Day-nurseries were created to facilitate the work of women, while literacy and Hebrew classes developed in recognized as well in unrecognized villages.

The frontier between the accompaniment of the social change and the direct action of associations as acting agents is thin here. We can nevertheless make

21 Information collected by interview, May 2003 Nazareth.
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the assumption that these associations influence indirectly, maybe directly, the social change process. While proposing, for example, courses of economic management of the household or while informing the women on the means placed at their disposal to have their money personally (banking accounts, credit cards, etc), female associations call into question the traditional place of women in the family unit. Projects of empowerment are also proposed like the action taken by the Bedouin association Women of Lagiya which intends to employ a maximum number of women by asking them to make traditional Bedouin embroideries which they then sell on. This project, initiated nearly five years ago, employs today 160 women from the village of Lagiya (northern east of Beer Sheva), originating from various families. The association develops, moreover, real marketing strategies by canvassing Israeli chains of shops and while selling on Internet. Women of Lagiya thus intends to promote the Bedouin culture by using new technologies and the innovating economic tools placed at disposal by the industrialized and capitalist Israeli society. Moreover this association functions like a new centre of sociability for settled Bedouin women having lost some of their traditional functions. The Bedouins, who take part in the "embroideries" program, regularly go to the association to bring and carry new remunerated orders. This takes part thus in the meeting of women from various families - some families never being in contact because of clan logics - and the development of various conversations.

Female Judaeo Arab associations: questioning the nature and the methods of the gender binder

Arab women citizens maintain various relationships with their gender consciousness and their Palestinian identity and this articulation is rather misunderstood. For those who are openly defined as feminists and who thus place on an equal footing these two entities, the process of dissociation of fights is possible. In this sense, they are involved in the defence of the women's rights in feminist organizations (Jewish and/or Arab), then in parallel in Palestinian nationalist movements. The two struggles are led simultaneously on different grounds. This practice amounts to testing the solidity of a gender binder. The Israeli feminist lobbies which include Jewish and Arab women militants are part of this exclusive dynamics. Let us take the example of We Power-Women's Electoral Power for the Advancement of Women's Leadership in Israel, created in 2000 to encourage women to become candidates and influential in their parties. The ideological line of the movement is to help women militants, whatever their partisan affiliation, to gain power. Jewish and Arab women

24 Bedouin women were, for example, charged to go to seek water in wells which were then places of sociability for women of various families.
citizens, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Likud and Jabha militants mix there. During the meetings, questions of general politics are openly disregarded. Only feminism is used as cement and driving force by these women militants. One of the meetings of the movement was organized in May 2003 in the sumptuous villa of a Jewish American woman in Herzliya. Next to the buffet, a Philippine domestic served the guests with drinks while about ten women militants discussed feminism. Michal Yudin, co-director of the movement, explains: "We want to help women to enter politics. To make the women realize the importance of going to vote and to vote for women". Would the feminist consciousness transcend political affiliations? Would the gender binder exceed ethnic identities? It is necessary to face the facts, this apparently irenic practice has its limits. First of all, well-off Ashkenazim women are in a majority in the movement, unlike Sephardim and Arab women citizens (only one Arab woman militant, Taghrid Shabita of Jabha, was contacted). In addition, they are actually women who can ally themselves on precise and specific female or social questions. There is no natural and immutable female solidarity but specific agreements on subjects of common interest. There can be a consensus on gendered but not partisan questions between female militants who share common characteristics. The female consciousness is relative and dependent on numerous other socio-economic and political variables.

Moreover, the political situation in the region leads more to the exacerbation of “communautarisms” than to going beyond them. The partisan logic and ethnic identities are strongly marked and closely dependent. The “differentialist” step which aspires to extract the gender logic from ethnic and/or partisan memberships to make of it a federator dynamics seems to us naive. Admittedly, as Bernard Lahire has theorized it, the human identity is multiple and is expressed differently over time. But that is valid only for certain identities. Others are inseparable, not because they are naturally bound, but because the context wants that the socially built bond be, at a moment, stronger than differentiation. In the case of peace associations of Israeli and Palestinian women, gender and national logics are interlinked. Here it is not any more about a strategy of differentiation of a "gendered" consciousness and a national membership but about a balancing of the two identities to the service of a struggle for a fair peace between Israelis and Palestinians. These associations were very active during the first Intifada by creating links between the Israeli, Jewish and Arab women citizens, and the Palestinian ones. Often pointing out their subordinate status in the Israeli and Palestinian societies, these women militants think to be able to include themselves in the defence of human rights.

25 Interview May 2003 Herzliya
The *Women in black* organization is an example of this trend to rapprochement. Created two months after the beginning of the first *Intifada* in 1987, the association enjoys today a broader echo on the international scene. However, as Valérie Pouzol noted, these movements gradually direct themselves towards a community political activism\(^{27}\). Confronted with the assertion of nationalisms on both sides, these associations lost power and in particular face competition by community feminist movements. This is visible among the Arab women citizens who form their own associations after having been disappointed by large organizations and in particular by the marginalization of questions specific to the Palestinians of Israel. Consequently if gender can be a parameter of rapprochement, it is not exclusive and it depends on many other variables. The power rise of the organizations of Palestinian women in Israel confirms the relativity of a female solidarity and the centrality of national identities.

**A new political issue: redefining a feminism specific to the Arab or Palestinian women citizens in Israel**

Today Arab feminists are confronted with a major challenge, that of a redefinition of their fight. Arab feminists who seek to become autonomous do so in comparison with feminism, considered to be too radical, which they often liken to Western or Jewish feminism in Israel. These criticisms are also made by non-feminists who do not feel concerned by the feminist movement such as it is led by certain Jewish or Arab women and who claim a definition specific to the interests of Arab women citizens. They are particularly critical towards some Arab feminists, whom they consider as completely enslaved by the Jewish and Western model and too radical to be representative of the expectations of their community. They accuse them of having left aside the fight in favour of the Palestinians. Their agendas do not appear realistic to them.

Zuheira Sabbagh, feminist militant in *Jabha* declared: "I am in favour of a feminist education of women but I refuse to copy American or Israeli feminism. We must protect our identity (...) I am against the too easy expression of "honour crimes" which is false. Many murders are not honour crimes. The problem is that feminists relay this error. There are only very seldom questions of adultery and the men take advantage of this to hide behind this expression"\(^{28}\).

The use of a feminist ideology considered to be non suitable results in distorting some questions. It is thus a question of redefining a feminism specific to Arab women citizens of Israel and of bringing coherent and suitable answers. Many thus claim to start by teaching reading and writing to women, enabling them to

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\(^{28}\) Interview May 2003 Nazareth
work and finally to give birth to a feminist consciousness. Then the question of 
the understanding of Arab women citizens’ expectations by the women militants 
arises. It seems that mobilized women have many difficulties in evaluating the 
opinion and the desires of their fellow-countrywomen. Many are conscious of 
their incomplete information on the remainder of the Arab women citizens.

Some regret the lack of debate on an Arab feminism in the Palestinian 
community of Israel. They think that this debate exists among Palestinian 
women of the Occupied Territories or in countries like Egypt, where feminists 
work on a specific definition of their movement. It seems, indeed, that Arab 
women citizens in Israel have more difficulties in formulating a "gendered" 
agenda than Palestinian women citizens of the Occupied Territories. For some 
female militants, the reason would be the lack of clearness in the priorities to be 
stated and their status of minority which weakens the process of 
“autonomization” of arguments in favour of the women. Moreover, many 
Palestinian feminists in Israel refuse today to be compared with Western 
feminism and the reformulation of a specific agenda seems essential. This 
assessment was made by Pnina Motzafi-Haller of the Ben Gourion University in 
Israel, when she was interested in Egyptian feminism, to draw lessons for the 
Israeli feminism which she considered as too much westernized. She thus 
quotes three criticisms emitted by Rosemary Sayigh: "(...) that western 
women’s experiences do not provide a universal framework for analysing gender 
oppression; that we must provide historically and culturally specific analyses of 
non-western women’s situations and political action; and that we must listen to 
women telling their own struggles." The Egyptian women seem, indeed, to have 
worked on a redefinition of their movement. It is thus not a surprise that the 
Arab women citizens of Israel regularly quote Nawal El Saadawi as an Arab 
model of feminism. This Egyptian trend is qualified by Motzafi-Haller, as 
"modernistic-nationalist", in opposition to the liberal feminism inherited from 
Western countries. Arab women citizens intend to make the same thing while 
working again on their own feminist identity. In this sense, Motzafi-Haller 
regrets the lack of “autonomization” of the Israeli feminism which requires a 
work of redefinition, in particular to highlight all the parts of the society left 
aside: Mizrahim, Arabs, etc.

In terms of “autonomization” of Arab feminism, it is also interesting to note 
that this process can be done in reference to a religious particularity. It is thus

29 Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "Reading Arab Feminist Discourses: In Postcolonial Challenge 
to Israeli Feminism ", in HAGAR Social International Science Review, vol.1 (2), 2000, 
p.63-89.
30 Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinian women and politics in Lebanon", in Judith Tucker (Ed.) 
The case of the Islamic feminism which intends to be different from the other female movements (Jewish and Arab) by marking its Moslem specificity and by articulating gender and religious identity. The assistance suggested is part of a total reflection on solidarity between members of the Moslem community in Israel and in the Occupied Territories. "Gendered" agendas are thus closely related to the religious – Moslem - but also the national – Palestinian - variable. They thus condemn discriminations made to women but rather prefer to speak about differences than about inequalities. Particularly essentialist their speech relates back to the traditional distinction private/public, where inequalities are denied in the name of the concept of difference. The support and the assistance suggested thus try to be faithful to the religious message and even if these associations work in favour of the women, they are not dissociated from the needs of the Moslem community as a whole.

### Relations between political parties and associative movement: the blurring of frontiers between conventional and non-conventional politics

The place of politics within the associative field also raises the question of the relations between political parties and social movements. This is not a new phenomenon, nor a phenomenon specific to the Israeli society. On the Palestinian side, for example, in addition to the women’ committees of the PLO, there were also created in the Eighties: The Union of Women's Work Committees close to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, The Union of Working Women's Committees close to the Communist Party, The Union of Palestinian Women's Committees close to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and The Union of Women's Committees for Social Work close to Fatah. These various formations, in addition to proximity in their name, maintained a severe competition in the financing and the preparation of projects. Thus, in addition to charitable and social female associations, new structures developed in the wake of political groups.

For Palestinians inside Israel, the example generally presented is that of the Islamic Movement which has benefited for many years from a broad network of pietistic and charitable organizations. Many associations led by women propose all kinds of assistance intended for Moslems in difficulty: collection of clothing and food, financial donations but also nurseries for children to compensate for the absence of day-nurseries in the majority of Arab villages. Though these organizations often make a point of dissociating themselves from the conventional political sphere, they remain very close to the various branches of

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the Islamic Movement. Thus it is not rare to find in these associations the wives, mothers or sisters, of militants of the Islamic Movement. This bond is however not specific to the Islamic Movement, and numerous are the parties which enjoy supports in the associative world. The relation between the Labour Party and Na’amat (one of the largest feminist associations in Israel) is real. The Women Workers Movement, which changed name for Na’amat in 1975, represents the female part of the Histadrut, confederation of trade-unions close to the Labour Party. This phenomenon can also be found in the Arab community where social organizations are closely related to Jabha - like the Movement of Democratic Women connected to the Communist Party - or Tajammu’. Several women militants gave a report on the bond between politics and associative, one of them affirming: "the leadership of the female organizations in Nazareth is in the hands of Jabha ". Nabila Espanioly and Aida Tuma Sulaiman, members of Jabha, are today figures of Arab feminism in Israel and directors of famous associations in Nazareth.

The relation, between a partisan involvement and an associative involvement, partly explains the fragility of the gender binder, within the Arab community of Israel. We refer in particular to an attempt to establish a Palestinian women’s Committee in Israel, in the course of the year 2000, which did not succeed and precisely for partisan questions. According to what was reported to us, significant dissensions appeared between the female members of Jabha and Tajammu’ as for the question of the piloting of this project. The political question appeared obvious. The women and/or feminists engaged in this experiment were for the majority affiliated to political parties, and it seems that this was the principal obstacle to the installation of the committee. Thus they reproached each other for wanting to appropriate the project to the benefit of their parties. The membership of a party and loyalty to a partisan political line were factors unfavourable to the birth of an Arab female consciousness and to its transposition in a Palestinian women organization. Even if they want to organize and propose their Palestinian female consciousness, they are confronted with a major challenge: that of exceeding partisan affinities.

The objective of this study is to go beyond the distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere, which is not very relevant in the comprehension of the politicization of the Arab or Palestinian women citizens of Israel. The politics indeed transcends this rigid classification and fully concerns women. Their discretion on the conventional national and local political scene should not conceal their massive mobilization in the associative field. If this mobilization is not new for the Israeli or Palestinian women, on the other hand, the development

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32 Let us note however that the Histadrut is directed today by Amir Peretz, leader of Am Ehad.
Politics and Arab women mobilization

of "gendered" agendas and their articulation with the national fight are a recent phenomenon and in constant reformulation. While evolving with the social changes, this involvement closely follows the social evolutions which affect the Arab women of Israel. It is thus well about a political sphere in its own right with its own methods and issues. Moreover that more largely raises the question of the place of women in the non-conventional political sphere and in particular of the politicization of the domestic sphere - family, groups of pairs, networks of inter-acquaintance, etc. It would be now particularly interesting to be interested in this social field where women hold a privileged place like guarantor of the Palestinian culture and identity roots. Moreover, these problems are thus part of a larger questioning on the ethnic and political mosaic of the State of Israel and on its consequences on the future of its society and its institutions.

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