THE EXCLUSION OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCILS

REALITY AND CHALLENGES

BETWEEN STATE OPPRESSION

AND SOCIETAL OPPRESSION

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2 Introduction

Kayan Organization works on increasing Arab women's representation as members of elected councils in local authorities, under its project "Women's Representation in General Politics and Decision-Making Positions", which relies on intensive systematic field work with women particularly, and other society segments in general, as part of our efforts to achieve social justice and reduce all forms of discrimination, in particular gender-based discrimination. Kayan believes that women's political participation is one of the most important factors that plays into women's rights to equality, and is a basic human right in a democratic society. Kayan is convinced that work on enhancing women's status in politics and decision-making positions must be based on investing in the field, and nurturing women's leaders on the one hand, and developing the requisite knowledge on women's status in general and local politics on the other hand[1].

Few studies have discussed Palestinian women's representation in Israel's public policy and decision-making positions. Other studies have discussed Palestinian Arab women's participation in local government[2] in the Palestinian Arab society in Israel. In addition to studies conducted, some frameworks and social organizations have addressed this issue through awareness raising and changemaking programs. However, despite these research and practical efforts, we have not

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1 For years, "Kayan" has been working to increase the participation of women in public life and local politics, in parallel to developing effective and influential feminist leadership, both locally and nationally, by developing and organizing local work for groups and feminist frameworks, including empowerment and capacity building training, professional counseling and building community based programs to fulfill women's needs in the field, to overcome the obstacles and challenges that prevent women from participating in public life and local government, or by developing work with National Feminist Forum- "Jusour" which includes 40 women representing 20 women groups from all segments of the Arab society. This forum works throughout the year to combat discrimination against women and to increase their participation in the public sphere in general, and in local authorities in particular, by conducting periodic meetings and professional training and organizing study days and media campaigns and other national programs. "Kayan" association has also participated in other feminist frameworks aiming to influence women's political participation, from which "Feminist Organizations Coalition" that worked on representing women in the Higher Follow Up Committee for Arab Citizens, and indeed in 2008 women representation was achieved in the Higher Follow Up ommittee for Arab Citizens by adding the parties representation (Najami Yousef, 2012: 56). "Kayan" also worked through a work coalition to amend Local Authorities Law to ensure women representation in local authorities' elections.

2 See for example Naim, 2015, Daoud, 2009, Abu Baker, 1998.

noticed real meaningful development or change that has affected women representation in decision-making positions, in politics generally, or in local politics particularly. Women continue to suffer from exclusion in this sphere. Hence, since our society has not yet learned from existing research, and has not yet suggested programs or action plans that ensure change making, Kayan decided to maintain this issue on its agenda, to deepen its research, and to study from aspects never studied before by bringing to light the voices and experience of women who ran for local elections. This is in contrast to existing research that focused on the voices and experience of men who went through elections or who have been elected to local councils. This research also includes practical analyses on the impediments that prevent or limit women from running and winning elections, and suggests practical solutions and working methods to remove these impediments. We aim to produce in-depth analytical knowledge of critical and feminist thought based on our society's particular context and the experiences of the women themselves, then to utilize this knowledge in the process of social change in order to reduce discrimination and oppression against women, and to achieve equality between men and women.

If we look at the current reality (the results of local authorities' elections in 2013), we find that only 14 women won the elections, and four of them became council members according to rotation agreements. At the time of writing this research, only nine women occupy a seat in local authorities, as municipality member Madiha Rammal was removed, and other women resigned according to rotation agreements they signed, or for other reasons. It is worth mentioning that the number of women candidates for membership in local authorities, including mixed cities, has reached 165 women from 44 towns, of whom 82 were nominated for the first five places in the list. These women candidates occupied the following places on their party lists: two candidates for the first place, 19 candidates for the second place, 24 for the third, 23 for the fourth and 14 for the fifth.[3] Only one woman, Hanin Zoabi, was a candidate for heading a municipality, as she was nominated by the National Democratic Assembly party in the elections for Nazareth's mayor.

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3 See Jacki Khoury, "Elections in Arab Authorities: Women Are Moving Forward", Haaretz website, 02.10.2013

We view women's political participation as an essential democratic right and as a national and feminist duty, since it is an arena in which women can take a vital and effective role that influences all levels of society, and can affect general policies and decisions that are important to different sectors and areas of the society, including women's status. The need for women's participation is especially pertinent in the context of the current reality in which local authorities are characterized by a lack of professionalism, favoritism, and poor planning. Furthermore, research and literature indicate that women's empowerment in the political, economic and social fields has become one of the most prominent indicators to a society's advancement, as democracy and respecting human rights are not complete without it. Despite what most research and data have confirmed in relation to the progress of the Palestinian women and the increase in their participation in certain fields, such as education and labor, their participation still remains limited and does not contribute to achieving full equality in political, social and economic fields. This can be readily seen in their lack of political participation and in their overall absence from decision- making positions.

We at Kayan believe in the need for living in a safe, pluralistic, just society that is free of gender-based discrimination, in which Arab Palestinian women have equal opportunities to fulfill themselves and achieve leading and effective roles in society by fulfilling their rights, both individually and collectively. Integrating Arab Palestinian women into decision-making and leadership positions is a vital step in moving towards these goals. Kayan adopts a holistic vision in analyzing the reality of Arab Palestinian women citizens of Israel, and sees the need to deepen this understanding and further analyze the reality, by seeing what can be learned from research, and the benefits that the results of research can have in the process of developing our work. Research is important as a reference and source of data to enrich our understanding of the reality r our context, especially the realities of the women themselves, which will help us in formulating plans and work strategies to enrich the programs and projects that we and other associations conduct to empower women.

Our aim in this research is to understand the obstacles and challenges that prevent women from achieving adequate representation in local government, which will help us in our work to raise women's representation and influence in local politics.

This research investigates the deep roots of the problem, and accounts for the fact that we are working in a complicated reality that is the result of social and political process the Arab Palestinian society has undergone since the establishment of the state of Israel. In this context, Arab women suffer from compounded discrimination that includes various discriminatory structures, stemming from the fact that Arab Palestinian women in Israel are an indigenous minority that suffers from systematic discrimination and exclusion from political decision-making positions, and as a result, this minority is also excluded from sharing in the public sphere. This minority-based discrimination from the state is compounded by the fact that Arab Palestinian women are part of a chauvinistic society that still sees women as inferior, and excludes them from power and decision-making positions. Thus, an attempt to study and understand the status of Arab women in general, and the issue of women's exclusion from public life and from Arab local authorities in particular, requires a frame of reference that takes into consideration all the effecting levels and elements under the political and social context that Arab women live within. From this context and position, the present research clearly reveals a reality of severe discrimination and marginalization against Arab women. It also reveals that the state, and the Arab society do not take responsibility for their role in maintaining this reality, via systems and institutions, nor do they seek to create serious change.

Here again, we emphasize that the importance of this research stems from its dependence on listening to the voices of women who underwent candidacies for local authority, and on analyzing the experiences that women went through as they attempted to break taboos and barriers for the progress of society and the advancement women's status. This research gave women a space to tell their stories in their own language and in the manner they chose. This research also includes, as mentioned previously, the voices and experiences of men who underwent the same experience.

3 Political representation and participation of Women

3.1 The concepts of political representation and women's representation

Representation does not only mean the mere presence of representatives of different groups, including women, in decision-making frameworks. Rather, the principle of representation is to ensure that there is a substantial and effective presence of representatives of different groups in society, and the possibility to hold a real debate and dialogue among the groups on issues of interests, visions, and aspirations that they do not agree about. Democratic debate and dialogue requires political representation of different groups and their participation in dialogue, and that the representation is real, effective, and influential, in order to truly achieve the principle of partnership and democratic engagement. An ostensible representation that does not rise to a real and effective level of democratic participation in the political life, is nothing but a shallow representation that lacks substance and content. (Jammal, 2006: 125)

Hence, the representation that we seek of women in local authorities is a representation that ensures the presence of women's voices, and is capable of effecting local authorities' agendas, decisions and policies, in compliance with women's and society's interests and aspirations. Women's effective and influential representation is a matter that receives a special notice in local authorities, because of the importance of powers and positions embedded by the Law of Local Authorities, and of its direct influence over women's lifestyle and status in the Arab society.

As is well known, the importance of practical representation of any group in any framework increases in accordance to the importance of powers and functions that are attributed to this framework, and according to the extent of influence of these powers and functions have over the lives and interests of the group. Functions and powers attributed to local authorities' effect women directly, as the local authorities oversee education and teaching, social welfare, and culture. Even though women's representation in local authorities is high as employees, women are marginalized in these positions and are deprived of being a part of the decision-making processes. Although we do not prioritize here the significance of some issues over others or their effect on women, such as planning, construction and infrastructure among other issues, in the current reality, we find that women are more engaged in issues related to education, and are concerned with and benefit from welfare more than others.

In addition to the importance of influencing issues directly related to women's causes, true partnership with women and adequate representation in local authorities are pressing needs that must be addressed in the process of changing the hegemonic prevailing chauvinistic culture in local authorities, via challenging the current patriarchal norms that exclude women, and through women's direct input in policies and decision-making processes.

In this context, we note that many researchers have pointed to the importance of the cultural identity and the value system prevailing in political frameworks and institutions and have pointed also that decision-making and policy framing in political institutions are decided in accordance with the cultural concepts and the prevailing value system in these institutions (March and Olson, 1984). Most of the interviewees related to this point and confirmed that local authorities are dominated by chauvinistic patriarchal culture, which is reflected in their policies and work programs that perpetuate chauvinistic culture in these institutions and in the society. Despite having women representatives, local authorities do not adopt women's causes and do not put women's needs on their agendas. Furthermore, local council do not enact policies to limit discrimination against women, which remains an issue of interest for women only, and the implementation of such policies is dependent on the presence of women in local authorities. However, it became clear during the research how important true and influential women's presence is in the local authorities in order to start building a culture of gender sensitivity in local authorities. Many female participants confirmed that their nomination for local authorities is not only limited to their desire to participate in decision-making in specific issues concerning women, but rather, is due to the need to create a fundamental and permanent change in the chauvinistic structure prevailing in local authorities.

In terms of real and effective representation, it is important to emphasize that the participation of citizens enriches their lives with meaning, whether this is via participation or by others representing them. This enrichment only holds true if representation is through a true partnership based on acknowledging attitudes and concerns of all segments of society. Therefore, women aspire not just for participation and representation, but for true and practical partnership, in which their voices and needs are addressed at all levels of decision-making in the local authorities.

3.2 Political representation of Palestinians in Israel

The ability of the Palestinian citizens to influence Israeli politics is almost marginal. This is because Palestinians have become a minority within their homeland after the Nakba. Palestinians were not only displaced and lost most of their lands and villages and cities after the Nakba, but they also lost basic conditions for their cultural and political existence. In this context, researcher Amal Jammal (Jammal, 2006) claims that the Arab society is stuck in an unequal circle of representation that deprives it from its right to true political participation, making the Arab society's political representation as a collective fighting for its rights hollow of substance and meaning. Jammal continues and claims that the Palestinian society participates in elections and succeeds in introducing parties that represent it and its interests to the state and the Jewish majority. Since the Nineties, the Palestinian society established non-governmental organizations that aim to fulfill its needs and to represent its interests to state institutions, however the status of the Arab parties and organizations is less influential than that of Jewish organizations. Arabs have not and continue to be excluded from decision-making processes. As with most years since the establishment of the state, Arabs were not representatives in the Israeli government except for very few cases. Furthermore, Arab parties have not been partners in the governmental coalition, and thus are outside of decision-making processes related to state institutions which also are dominated by the Jewish majority. Jammal asserts that inequality has not been a result of governmental policies or certain bureaucratic decisions, but rather stems from basic assumptions by the state leadership and the Jewish majority, and their understanding of the meaning of Israel as a Jewish state, according to the Zionist definition that constitutes the state's inequality.[4] Jammal also claims that the combination of the Jewish character of the state with complete hegemony of the Jewish majority in the representative institutions does not only ignore the Palestinians' collective rights as a national minority, but also, empties their political participation from its essence (Jammal 2006: 125-140).

Asaad Ghanem also affirms this point through his claim that the parliamentary policy of the Palestinians in Israel is ineffective because of its ethnic affiliation in

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4 Jammal further pointes that Israel has confronted the stubborn political action of the Arab citizens by adding basic principles of politics with a constitutional legal dimension, aiming at emptying the Palestinian parliamentary political participation. For example, Number Seven amendment for the Knesset Law that prevents any list that aims at eliminating the state of Israel as a Jewish state from participating in the parliamentary elections (Jammal, 2006, 130).

the context of Israel, an ethnic state that considers itself committed to the needs of the Jewish majority instead of serving its citizens. Ghanem sees that democratizing Israel and making it a state of all its citizens is the only solution for Israel to become a normal state, although these are drastic changes.

If this equal state is not achieved, Ghanem contends, the Arab minority will become more aware of the boundaries of its political action, and will therefore think of unconventional ways to achieve equality, including the use of violence (Ghanem, 2010: 22-59). In his study of the political participation of Palestinian women in Israel, Adnan Naim contends that in this context of political disenfranchisement of the Arab Palestinian society in Israel at large, Arab Palestinian women are further excluded from politics due to reasons stemming from the Arab society itself, including its social structure, the role of the ruling institutions in maintaining the chauvinistic structure in the Arab society, religious extremism and opportunism (Naim, 2015).

As we share the Palestinian society's demand for full rights in the state, we wonder why the Palestinian society's demands for full rights from the State are appreciated and accepted, while women's demands their rights and for full political participation and representation within their society does not receive this same acceptance. Furthermore, in the cases that women's demands are heard and accepted, it is mere ostensible appreciation that is not accompanied by action to bring about real, radical and sustainable change.

3.3 Arab local authorities- reality, performance and election methods

Statistics show that the participation rate of the Arab minority in Israel in the local elections is very high compared to its participation in the Knesset elections, with voter participation in local elections sometimes reaching 90%. This percentage indicates the importance of local authorities in the Arab society. As we have seen above, the ability of Arab citizens to influence public policy is very marginal, thus local authorities are the main arena for influence and leverage. One must add to this reasoning the family pressure on individuals to vote, which can happen even if a family member has not been an actual resident of the village for years.

A survey by Mada Al-Carmel Center on Local authorities (Khoury Sabbagh, 2004) indicates that the poor performance of the Arab authorities is due not only to the lack of financial resources these authorities suffer from, but also to the criteria and methods of their election process. Researcher Areij Sabbagh claims that elections in the Arab society are mostly run on family/sectarian/clan bases. The survey indicates that these affiliations have been a decisive factor in the competition for the heading and membership of local authorities, and that this phenomenon is a continuation of the trend that began in the 1980s, characterized by a decline of partisan political forces in favor of the local clan lists. (Khoury Sabbagh, 2004: 11).

Maha al-Taji (Al-Taji, 2012) points out that the strategies of Arab political parties/parties active in the Arab society for dealing with clans differ, but have similar results, as the political parties all adopted strategies to either deal directly with the clans or to coexist with them. This has left the door open for clan leaders to continue playing the lead role in the local elections, ignoring the national aspirations of the Arab minority as a collective.

We point out here that the economic and social changes that have taken place in the Arab villages since the British mandate, and that have deteriorated after the establishment of the state, strengthened the existing traditional structures, especially the clan, in the management of local authorities. Nahla Abdo (1987) examines the role of the Mandate authorities in transforming the "Mukhtar" (the chosen) establishment and the traditional role of the Mukhtar as a representative of his family based on his being the eldest member, and into a representative to the Mandatory Government from the local population. Subsequently, Israel continued this method, which has led to the continuation of the traditional structure of the clan and the selection of illegal leaders appointed by Israel to serve its interests. This has affected the status of women. With the loss of land and

displacement after the Nakba, the Arab family underwent changes, including the transfer of the productive role to the man alone without the women who were working and productive before the Nakba. This has led to the maintenance of the current social structure, has strengthened the chauvinistic structure of the family, and has restored some concepts, amongst them "women's honor" being linked to women's behavior (Abdo-Zubi, 1987: 29-41). In his analysis of the results of the 1998 elections, Asaad Ghanem pointed to the increase in the strength of the clan, predicting that if this approach continues, the clan will continue to increase its strength in the future and the Arabs will continue to act politically as a society composed of separate groups and individuals rather than as a single national minority.[5]

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5 Asaad Ghanem in an interview to Al-Sinnara Newspaper on 27 November 1998, quoted at Daoud, 2005: 23).

3.4 Political participation of Palestinian women

Palestinian women participated in public life in Palestine before the Nakba. Women were active in the productive work in the Palestinian villages and cities (Hasan, 2008 Miari 2015, Abdo, 1987), and were active members in the struggle for women's rights as well as the struggle against the British Mandate and the Zionist Movement (Fleischman, 2000 Abd El-Hadi, 2005). This held true up until the Nakba which led to the displacement of the majority of the Palestinian people and the destruction of cultural and political institutions, including the parties and feminist frameworks that women fought and worked within it.

Researcher Dr. Khawla Abu Baker points out that in this context in which Palestinian women in Israel have often been active partners alongside men in the political and military struggle against the British Mandate and the post-State of Israel, their activity has not been defined as a political action as men's activity has been considered. Abu Baker also points to the fact that the national political character of Arabs in Israel has characterized all spheres of life, therefore it has been impossible to separate women's direct political action from their contribution to social effort (Abu Baker, 1998).

It should be noted here that the establishment of the chauvinistic structure by the Israeli authorities since the establishment of the state, as noted above, has greatly contributed to the exclusion of women from public space and increased their exposure to the dominance of men of their families. We note here that the deliberate and systematic attacks and harassment on women by the Israeli army led to opposition from Palestinian families to the participation of women in political work and their involvement in the struggle, because subjecting women to attacks and harassment is contrary to social customs and traditions.

In her study on women's political participation in local politics from 1950 to 2003, researcher Suheir Abu Oqsa notes that since the first Israeli elections for local authorities, until 1993, the number of Arab women elected as members of the local authorities was eight. Between the years 1998-2003 this number increased to 10 women elected. However, the substantial change in the representation may not show a commitment to representing women, but rather to using them, as in the first period women participated in local authorities for one or two terms, but in the second period they participated for conditional periods by rotating or following the resignation or the death of the candidate before them in the list.

Abu Oqsa refers to three reasons for the lack of increase in women's representation, two of which were previously mentioned in the context of analyzing the political marginalization of the Palestinians in Israel from political representation, namely, political marginalization of the minority, which increases the weight of the clan, and the second being the traditional social structures.

The third reason that Daoud points to, is women being their own impediment to representation for various reasons. Daoud claims that the problem lies not in each reason alone, but in the interconnectedness of the three reasons (Dahood, 2005).

Examining the views of the Palestinian society in Israel, as related to the participation of women in political action[6] under the so-called national struggle and chauvinistic mentality, researcher Honaida Ghanem points out that politics are considered an action for "men" and a chauvinistic sphere, and women who enter it face obstacles. With the interconnection of clan affiliation, nationality and patriarchal culture, women turn to become reserve voices, and thus support but do not participate in politics (Ghanem, 2005: 146-148). Nevertheless, in her study, 78% of the respondents expressed strong support for the participation of women in political and social action, while 22% expressed their strong opposition, but Ghanem adds, although this datum is considered to be positive, the attitude of the respondents towards keeping political leadership exclusively for men was different, as 54% of the respondents agreed strongly to keep the leadership male only, while 74% of the men were willing to vote for an electoral list headed by a woman. Ghanem attributes the difference in the attitudes of men to the fact that society is willing to accept some changes, but it still refuses to turn this change into a fundamental change to the patriarchal structure (Ghanem, 2005: 148).

If we look at recent years, namely 2013, we find that the results of local elections in Israel indicate that the participation rate in voting in Arab towns was 87%, and the participation rate in some Arab towns amounted to more than 90%, such as Kofor Qara which reached 94% (according to data by the Ministry of Interior, 2013). Despite this very high participation, the participation of Arab women in the membership and chairmanship of local authorities is still very low. In the 2008 elections, only six of the 149 female candidates succeeded. After 2008 elections,

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6 This is part of a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research of the attitudes towards issues and rights of the Palestinian women in Israel, which included 1,200 respondents, 36 interviews and 9 focus groups. (Ghanem, 2005).

hopes and expectations for a possible change in women's representation in the upcoming 2013 local elections were voiced, but the results of the 2013 elections did not make a significant difference.

The above data confirms that participation of Arab women in political work through their representation in the local authorities, despite basic and ineffective progress, is still very low, and requires follow-up examination and research to understand the root causes of the problem and find suitable alternatives to deal with it.

The low participation rate of women in public political life has not been reflected in their participation in voting for Arab local authorities. This is confirmed by the very high voting rate among women and men in local elections, in contrast to the voting rates for the Knesset. The active participation of women in electing and voting in the local elections did not live up to the degree of effective participation via running for elections. Despite the power of the clan system in the local elections and despite its inherent nature that imposes on women certain dictates in voting, such as voting for their husband's family, women showed a personal agency and relative ability to maneuver even under this system. In her study on women's local political loyalty, which focuses particularly on "alien" women, who come from a different family than their husband's family, researcher Taghreed Yahya Younis (Yahya Younis, 2015: 203-229) claims that the discourse about these women reveals the paradox between their margin on the one hand, and their claimed capacity to sway the results of the electoral battle with their voices on the other hand, as "alien" women constitute 80% of the wives among voting men. This battle is reflected in the contradiction between inherited loyalty versus allegiance by marriage. Younis points out that, through their vote, women are undermining the prevailing idea of their lack of agency. While women are expected to vote for their husband's family, the degree of maneuver men assign to women in voting is much lower than that accorded to women by themselves. Younis claims that women can practice electoral "fraud", as the majority women, those that are married outside their families, constitute the biggest violators of clan based electoral standards and challenge the clan electoral system.

Opinion polls claim that there is a large majority of men who positively view the candidacy of women to local authorities. However, it is worth noting here the paradox between the "positive" attitudes of Arab society on the issue of women's candidacy, membership, and chairmanship in local authorities and their positive

views on women's abilities to manage these positions which stand in sharp contradiction to reality and the very low rates of women's actual participation in local politics. One survey indicated that 82% of the Arab respondents expressed their support for the candidacy of a woman to the local authority, and 69% expressed support for the candidature of a woman to head the local authority. The results reflected also a similar trend about those believed to have competencies in the administration of local government. (Sabbagh-Khoury, 2004: 11).

If the results of this research reflect the truth, this means that the attitudes of our society support the presence of women in local politics, which raises the question as to what are the sources of the gap between these attitudes and what is happening in the reality? In this research, we will attempt to understand and analyze this gap by identifying the factors that prevent the translation of positive attitudes into concrete results, and by addressing the obstacles and practical difficulties facing women candidates in the local elections.

As will be seen later, the research emphasized the large gap between statements made by men about their attitudes towards the presence of women and women's causes in the local political scene and what is happening in reality. This is reflected in the absence of female or feminist agendas from the platforms of almost all the participants in local elections, as well as in the small number of women who were eventually elected to local councils.

4 Research Methodology

This study seeks to understand the obstacles and challenges that prevent women from being adequately represented in local government, and in particular, will try to understand the obstacles that prevent women or make them hesitant to run, the difficulties experienced by women candidates during the election's campaign and their impact on their will to continue, the work challenges faced by those who succeeded to gain a membership in the local authority, and the way these women overcame these challenges. Through the experiences of women and men, this study also seeks to find out who is responsible for the marginalization and exclusion of women in local politics, and what solutions can be put in place to raise women's representation and enhance their capacity to have effective influence. We at Kayan are interested in these results to find out how to develop our work on these issues.

The study is based on qualitative gender research methodology, which attributes great importance to the voices of women and views them as partners in research, by not only monitoring their experiences, but rather, also listening to their own renderings and analysis of these experiences. Therefore, this study relies on interviews with women who have been candidates for local authority, whether they succeeded in gaining a membership in the local authority or not. For the sake of comparison, the research also uses interviews with men who have experienced and succeeded in gaining membership or the chairmanship of the local authority. The study and analysis of these voices give the research credibility in the process of uncovering the general aspects and factors hindering the enactment of practical solutions to deal with the issue of women's exclusion in the political sphere and proposing methods for removing these factors.

In addition, while trying to understand the obstacles facing women, the study also considers men as a social type whose experience and challenges must be understood within the same patriarchal system that oppresses men as well, especially when they clash with other coercive structures such as the nation and the class. However, this does not mean that men do not enjoy privileges that women do not.

We in Kayan believe that the study of any aspect of women's rights starts from the field and by listening to women themselves and taking their experiences and hindering factors from their point of view as the fundamental starting point in developing implementable programs and proposals to change the reality. In the

context of the appropriate representation of women in local government and in deepening the research on obstacles, men's experiences and views about women's candidature and election to the councils of local authorities had to be addressed.

This research comes within the framework of a project about representing women in politics, and is an attempt to deepen the understanding of the status of Palestinian women and their representation in the local Arab authorities in the country. The research is based on a gender-specific research methodology, and is based on:

1. Focus groups that included members and heads of local councils, activists, social and political activists, and men and women who had tried to run for election but failed. We held two such focus groups, one in Osifya and the other in Arrabeh. The importance of focus groups stems from our belief in the need for different voices to be heard through direct and honest discussion among the parties involved. We believe that the dynamics in the group may highlight subjects that are not highlighted by personal interviews and are not presented by research based on working only segmented target groups.

2. In-depth interviews with women and men who tried to run for local authority elections, because we saw this mechanism as an appropriate way to collect information related to the subject of the research and to present experiences and attitudes, linking them to personal and public spaces, especially in the shadow of a great shortage in documentation of the experiences of women, or even the experiences of men, and their view of the research subject. This included 16 interviews with women who had had experience in running for local authority elections, 5 of whom had succeeded in reaching the council. 14 men were interviewed, including 4 heads of local authorities and 10 members of local authorities. The geographical distribution of the participants in the research was conducted across the country, ensuring that participants from Arab villages and cities, mixed cities and regional councils were present.

It is important to note that the research, as a qualitative research, is not intended to be representative, and therefore presents a reality that does not claim to represent all the Palestinian women entering the electoral arena. However, it brings to the forefront a voice that is important to hear, and raises issues that may reflect what women who ran for elections in different villages and cities, including mixed cities were going through.

5 Research results

This section of the research relies on interviews with women and men who participated in the research, as well as members and heads of local councils, and women and men who ran for the elections and failed, and on the focal workshops we conducted with women and men active in social and political work. We will review here the most important points of the research regarding factors that negatively affect women's participation and representation in local government.

5.1 Women's participation in the shadow of male domination of the public sphere and in the shadow of national oppression

5.1.1. General political and social reality

The women who participated in the research believe that the chauvinism and traditionalism of the Arab society, which enshrine social customs and traditions and constitute an obstacle to the achievement of social justice and real equality between men and women, are the main factors influencing local politics and the structure of political parties and lists and their nomination methods. Following, this chauvinism and traditionalism, according to respondents, translates into the main factor for excluding women from representation in local authorities. The participants in the research dealt with several levels of discrimination resulting from the society and its cultural character, which often negatively affect the representation of women, and also addressed the political situation of the Palestinian society as an indigenous minority oppressed by the State of Israel.

Women indicated that because of limited resources controlled by Arab citizens due to state policies, competition for local authority membership and resources increased dramatically. They also noted that women internalized the status given to them by society. Thus, when women go to vote they may not see other women as an option, and therefore they vote for men, thinking that women are not sufficiently qualified to reach political positions.

Samar (a candidate for a coalition of parties and a family list) says:

> "We live in a crooked reality; our society is limping because one of its legs is not there! Our society is chauvinistic, vanishing and deliberately excluding women in many areas, and when we talk about local authorities, exclusion is stronger and more fierce, because the "cake" is naturally small

and the competition is strong. Therefore, there may not be an opportunity for women to compete on the expense of men, making the local authority a convenient space for men, especially since women internalized that they are inferior to men, and adopted a humble lifestyle, avoiding this competition or convincing themselves that it is more suitable for men".

Samar adds:[7]

"The reality of women in Arab society is complex. On the one hand, society is primarily chauvinistic. The roles of women and men have been traditionally divided. Women, have internalized the values and traditions of society and act in accordance with them. Women also suffer from other issues as a result of discrimination and oppression from the state, especially in the field of labor, which places women in dire economic distress in the absence of their involvement in the labor market and makes a strong dependence to the family, which entrenches exclusion in the political arena".

Reem agrees with other participants regarding the role of women, saying:

"We lack awareness amongst women of the importance of women's representation in local authorities. In addition, most women internalized the status quo as implicit, which reflects the status of our traditional chauvinistic society and the status of our women. We, as women, did not do everything we could to reach politics and we often prefer to leave it to men. It is important to point out that women need the support of the core family at least, and in the absence of the necessary support, it is very difficult for women to have this experience and they face more challenges and difficulties. The full support I was granted from my husband and children and my extended family has made it easier for me and was a barrier against the reactionary and traditional chauvinistic voices".

Women also spoke about the gap between statements supporting the presence of women in local politics and what is happening on the ground, which confirms that our society is still traditionally chauvinistic in its positions and practices and believes that political action is reserved for men. Women here talked about society, including women who share the same ideas and adopt the same attitudes towards women as men do. Suad (a candidate for a party list) says:

7All the names in this research are fake.

"When I was nominated on the list, although my place was not guaranteed, I had an excellent response from the nearby environment, whether from family, friends or acquaintances. I did not face anyopposition or reservation. Some people even had reservation from me being a candidate in the fourth place instead of the second, but unfortunately our society is two-faced, people's declarations vanish when they need to vote. It is possible that people are not free to take their own decisions and eventually they submit to their society and vote traditionally. Some people may also vote according to their interests, but I come to serve my town, not parts of it".

Some emerging voices fully agree with women regarding how our society, being chauvinistic and traditional, impedes the representation of women. They also agree that there is a need to change the society and the chauvinistic system that is controlling it:

"Our society is a chauvinistic patriarchal society that gives men more than women and puts them in a higher position at all levels. For example, families do not accept female political leaders, and the areas of control and power remain the monopoly of men in all areas, especially in politics".

Other voices emerged that only partially support women. Those who had these voices believe that there is a difference between the roles of men and the roles of women in our society, which in their opinion is normal. They posit that there are things women cannot do, therefore it is difficult for a woman to be head or member of a local council, considering the nature of this position. For example, Saher says:

"The space in which women can participate in our society in interchangeably with men is defined. For example, women cannot be present in the streets to follow up the infrastructural works or pavement of the streets. This is a space for men. Women cannot be present in all fields or play all roles. Which woman accepts being on the streets all day to oversee the progress of works? I refuse to ask a municipal member to do so".

The voices of men especially highlighted the impact of the Arab society's status as an oppressed national minority on local politics, and its effect on the representation of women in local authorities. In this context Jamal says:

"The issue of women's representation in the local authorities cannot be

> *separated from understanding the Arabs' relationship with the state and its institutions, and the possibilities of influencing them, in the shadow of a chauvinistic traditional society of course. Because Arabs suffer from their non-representation in general politics and their inability to influence, local authorities remain for them an easy outlet for control, power and influence on the local scene, often for achieving personal interests, which of course is an obstacle for women because men find it difficult (or are unwilling) to concede in favor of women, which is also due to our society's lack of understanding of the importance of the presence of women representatives. Therefore, the imposition of chauvinistic hegemony continues to be the main issue".*

Women respondents suggest that one of the explanations of their previous reluctance to participate is related to the lack of a genuine desire on the part of the list to represent them, and not placing the issue on top of the list's priorities and dealing with it as a basic matter. Women said that lists which included women often nominated women for formality only. Some lists realized that the issue of women's representation has become central in public opinion, and that it is unacceptable to reject or make statements against women's representation, hence elections are an opportunity that can be exploited to bring more non-sectarian, non-family and progressive voices. This attitude was confirmed by most of the men interviewed during the research. Regarding this point, Saher says:

> *"Today, every presidential candidate or president of a list is looking for a woman to decorate his list. They are considering women as garnish. I am also thinking of putting a woman in the second place if I will ever run again. It is about how many votes you can guarantee. If everyone exploits this issue, why shouldn't I? this way everyone benefits".*

Maher also confirms this attitude, saying:

> *"Women's representation has become a trend. Today, every candidate is looking for a woman, however, only ostensibly. I personally will welcome a woman in the list if she had a good number of guaranteed votes. I support women's representation, but not at any cost".*

Suheir also confirms this saying:

> *"When I started my job as a member of the council, I noticed men were surprised from me mastering the issues that the council was dealing with. First, they ridiculed my interventions in the discussions, later they tried to ignore me as if I did not exist. I had a feeling that my presence was only*

a decoration, and if I did not insist and was not stubborn, I could not have voiced my opinion and delivered it properly".

Opinions differed regarding taking responsibility for the lack of women in local government. Some felt that it was everyone's responsibility, including parties, women and men, while others felt that women were primarily responsible for changing the status quo.

Wissam says:

"Everyone is responsible. For example, political parties must secure guaranteed positions for women and not only declare their support. Furthermore, the Follow-Up committee should ensure internal women's representation because all matters are interrelated. In my opinion, the local level is very important and essential, therefore we must do everything to enhance it".

Wisam adds:

"Our society excludes other groups such as youth, as it does not integrate youth into local authorities. Although it is difficult to achieve this change because men of a family or sect remain in their positions for decades, the presence of youth will contribute to increasing the representation of women, because the young generation is often enlightened and against the chauvinistic community system in general, and in regard to women specifically".

Maher knows the society is chauvinistic, but believes that women are responsible for changing the situation:

"Changing the situation is the responsibility of women. Men have no interest in change and abdication, and in my opinion, there is a problem here. Years ago, women did not have a strong personality or qualifications. Today, there are many capable women with strong personalities, but they are not willing to run for local authority, or even to participate in the council's committees, because some of them are afraid of society and customs and traditions, while others do not want to be in a chauvinistic unprofessional framework dominated by men".

5.1.2 Male chauvinistic violence and women's readiness to cope

Men and women have agreed that the electoral system is a violent system by all standards, which is reflected in the atmosphere of the general elections and their progress, which limits the presence of women. About this point Khawla states:

"The political game can be described as war, and its players must be wolves, and I personally do not want to be part of it anymore. I think many women are moving away from politics for the same reasons".

Safaa agrees with Khawla saying:

"The experience for me was like a tsunami, a very difficult experience, even on the family level, and it took me back a few steps. They used to write on social media pages that there are no men in my family therefore it nominated a woman, along with many harsh statements such as "he who agrees to his wife being in such a place is not a man".

Safaa adds:

"The elections are accompanied by a lot of problems. Sometimes it reached to the limit with a car burning or death threat. As a woman, this has greatly affected my family's support for me, and it came to the extent that my son accused me of being selfish".

Some women noted that violence was sometimes manifested by ignoring women and placing them in the corner. Suheir says:

"Working in local councils is very detesting and difficult. Women are ignored in meetings and discussions and in decision making. If women do not agree with men, they are ridiculed in a humiliating manner".

Miral describes men as a "mafia" and says:

"The extent of violence is also linked to the head of the list and the extent to which he adopts violent methods, and exploits his political and economic influence and relations. He controls the male members of the list as well, and if a woman tries to rebel or to become independent or even not support him, she and her core family will be threatened and harassed".

On this issue, men involved in the research agreed with women on the fact that local authorities' elections, starting from the preparatory stage and moving into post-election work, are violent and chauvinistic in all levels. Threats are made, violence increases, personal interests come to the forefront, and principles are lacking. Everyone agreed that this system did not suit women, and that it was difficult for women to be willing to work within that reality. A municipal member of a national party explained that women were not nominated on the list by saying:

"The level of local authorities and elections are poor. During the elections violence is used, and patriarchal practices are adopted by using dirty methods to gain benefits. This level is not appropriate for women of our society or women of the party".

As for changing the violent reality of elections, everyone agreed on the need to change it, but most of them expressed feelings of hopelessness and frustration at the possibility for change. Some believed that women should move away from this arena to protect themselves, while others blamed women for refusing to engage in local politics based on the idea that the low level of local authorities will not change and will not be a good environment for women. Some believe that the presence of women in the local authority will, over time, raise the level of local authorities. Amir, a municipal member of an independent youth list, explained that the local authority's environment does not suit the younger generation either. He says in this context:

"At first I entered the council to make a change. The situation is very bad and uncomfortable; there are verbal and physical violence and insults, in addition to favoritism. This atmosphere does not suit me of course, but we have to face it to make a change, and women must make a move even if the confrontation is not easy. What is expected of the young generation is also expected of women".

5.1.3 Managing elections: a chauvinistic system structured for exclusion

An additional and important reflection of the chauvinism of society is that the electoral system, both organizationally and practically, is managed in a chauvinistic manner, ignoring the status of Arab women, and not considering their daily lives and needs. The traditional division of family and household roles and tasks continues to be a burden on women and a deterrent to their participation in local politics, especially during the elections campaigns.

Amal says in this regard:

"Meetings are held in late hours and last far after midnight. The meetings are run in a chauvinistic violent manner, and the voices of women are often excluded, even in national parties. The meetings are very long, and preparation for a campaign entails spending time outside the home most days of the week and usually all night, and because it is important for me to "maintain my dignity" I assure I am always present. How can a married woman with children who lives in a chauvinistic society that expects her

to do all the house chores and take care of her children's education juggle between her home and family and elections? Especially if she is a working woman, her work place will most likely not be very forgiving. Today I admit that women do not have enough tools to face the rising chauvinism in our society".

Abeer adds in this context:

"Women are cut off from important and fateful meetings, such as meetings to build alliances or agreements between lists. In addition, I am ignored as a candidate and I am contacted only through men in my list and not directly. Organizational meetings and elections meetings are often attended by men only, and if women attend, they are put in the back seats. Those who are trying to behave differently and break down and go beyond the prevailing roles face a lot of criticism".

Sawsan stresses this point, and discusses the society's interaction with women in the election campaign, and especially the treatment of members of their own list:

"Society deals with the elections as if they were made by men, and as this space belongs to men, ostensibly or in a hidden manner. Most of the meetings are attended by men only, even the meetings held at houses or at the neighborhoods. If I personally make an invitation to a meeting and represent my list, then only women attend, although the invitation was made for both sexes, as if the men were too high to attend a meeting run by a woman. In addition to that, any attempt made by me to change this system surprises women too, and you are treated like a stranger, an anomaly or arrogant".

5.2 Family and sect structures during elections

Male and female participants in the research believe that family, sectarian and clan affiliations are key factors that play an influential role in all aspects of the electoral environment, in contesting for the head or membership of local authorities, and in the formation of local lists. It also directly and negatively affects the representation of women in local government.

Miral says on this subject:

"At the beginning, I wanted to nominate myself in a non-family independent list. I worked with great enthusiasm and optimism because I believed in my abilities and skills, but as the elections approached, my

> *family decided to run in the elections as a family list, and considered a woman member of the family wanting to nominate herself as something unacceptable that may influence the family's success and cause division in the family. My family began to pressure me to prevent my nomination, and the threat reached to a level that led me to give up my dream".*

Miral adds:

> *"The family was not satisfied with me dropping off the elections and forced me to run in the family list to win votes and to hide disagreements within the family, and I accepted because they threated my core family. Although my husband and children supported me in the beginning, they also folded because of the pressure and threats we faced. Even the closest people to me such as my brothers and sisters behaved like my extended family did".*

Although Miral's words clearly indicate that the chauvinistic system is still strong in our society, it also emphasizes that even if there is a qualitative change in social values, it will not withstand the strength of people associated with local authorities' daily interests and family pressures. But this does not negate the efforts to change and confront the social and political reality that still sees the local authority as the stronghold of men.

Beginning to crack chauvinism

Samar agrees with Miral, asserting that women have also internalized the family system, however, she points out that the support of the core family, which we have rarely seen in the past, indicates a minor rift in the chauvinistic system, and may be a sign of the beginnings of change.

> *"Women internalized the role and importance of the family, like men, and did not support me despite the support of my core family. They claimed that they could not vote for me while my male cousin was nominated in another list. There is a great difficulty in being free from the family, and no doubt that my core family's support has positively affected my wish to continue, because they did not submit to the pressures played by my extended family".*

It appears here that the core family plays a crucial and decisive role in the candidacy of women and in confronting the extended family in case of opposition. It also shows that initial support is also essential. However, as noted in the preceding paragraph, the change in values is still in its infancy. The support of the

core family is often linked to the existence or absence of another competitor from the extended family. If a man is not a competitor, the possibility of supporting women is almost guaranteed. This is confirmed by Muna also:

> "Despite my belief in my abilities and potential as a candidate, I know that this is not enough, and that the family has a great role. My father was a very well-known person and held leading positions through the leadership and management of social institutions, and he was my first supporter, which helped me immensely. Also, my husband supported and accompanied me from the beginning".

Many of the participants in the research stressed that despite their rejection of the family and clan systems, they had to submit to these systems and even use them as a means of their participation and victory in the elections, and to bring about change. Muna says in this context:

> "Although I am not affiliated to a family list and my goal is to serve everyone, I realized that I must address people according to their convictions. I always mention my family and its social achievements in the meetings, and I mention that my husband and his family support me".

Reem (a candidate for a sectarian family list) says:

> "I am against discrimination against women and against the chauvinistic society that oppresses women, and I do not consider myself sectarian or family affiliated. However, considering the scarcity of opportunities, I ran in a sectarian family list hoping to become a member of council, and then to work on creating change based on my convictions, but unfortunately, I did not win, and I think this is because voting in our society is still traditional and built on sectarian or family grounds or narrow mutual interests. Unfortunately, the same voting approach has been followed by men and women, and the opportunity for change has not been seized. In my opinion, this confirms that the society does not care about the existence of women as much as it cares that the family or the clan or the sect will be represented, and I paid the price twice. Firstly, because I did not get the votes of enlightened people who do not believe in the prevailing social system and believe in the need for women in politics, because I was enlisted in a chauvinistic sectarian family list. Them knowing that I do not conform to these values did not help me, as they could not give up fundamental values

and principles they believed in, especially since their votes would contribute to the success of the head of my list, who is a man that they do not conform with. Secondly, because I did not get people's votes, especially women from other families or sects, because they preferred to vote as required and expected from them so as not to harm the interests of those close to them".

Men who participated in the research agreed to the fact that family is a key element in local elections and is also one of the obstacles to women.

Bassam says:

"The main factor for the absence of women in the council is the family political system, a system that excludes 50% of society. All members of the council were nominated on behalf of their families, and no attention or mention was given to the possibility of a woman being nominated, because despite there being suitable women, they were not taken into consideration due to the desire of men to maintain their control".

Not all men agreed for the need to get rid of the family system, some of them even asserted its importance during and after elections. Saher says:

"The family is considered a source of support and protection for the candidate. Because I was a member of a powerful family, I was not subjected to pressure or extortion for personal or collective interests by other families. Naturally, the family prefers to be represented by a man because the elections are dirty, and women should not get their hands dirty".

On the other hand, Maher says:

"The family system is very present, and the support of the family is obviously important. The family plays a central role in consolidating women's exclusion from politics in general, and from local government in particular, and I would prefer if it was not the case, and if the elections were based solely on competencies. Change must come from women, by acquiring the needed abilities and skills to prove themselves, and then to influence the family".

As for the sectarian factor, all the participants in the research agreed that sectarianism is still exploited and used in the local elections and intersects with the family factor. This also negatively affects the possibility of women running in the

elections and contributes to the subordination of women in the sectarian system, forcing them to run in a manner incompatible with their principles and making it difficult for them to create change within the chauvinistic practices of local government. The sectarian lists approached to members of the sect, but also kept family considerations as well, thus sectarian lists relied on the support of big powerful families of the same sect that enjoyed social and political influence.

Women in this list, although many of them do not believe in sectarian or family systems, automatically adopted the approach of the list in the elections' campaign.

This is due in part to the lack of in-depth thinking about this matter and its consequences. Additionally, this is due to the fact that women are not involved in building and establishing the party list, in setting its agenda and objectives, since the women are relegated to roles that involve communicating with the public and with women in order to exploit all possibilities to reach the local authority and bring about change there.

Reem says:

> *"I was not as integrated with the list as I should have been. I was too busy recruiting and persuading people to vote for the list, and was unaware of many of the things that were being woven at the time. I was very busy communicating with the public, and I did not notice the issue of sectarianism because I was preoccupied primarily with the public interest and what I believed in, and the need for the public to support me for the benefit of the whole town".*

Reem adds:

> *"I realized after the elections were over that the presence of a woman who does not believe in sectarianism in a sectarian list is not useful. The whole list should follow the same approach and not only women, so I will not be in a list that does not comply with my convictions and of course, I will not participate with the same list next time. Rather, I will choose a list that suits my convictions, should such a list exist".*

In this context, some of the female candidates in sectarian lists mentioned that their awareness of the fact that the list operated on sectarian or family principles led them to try to influence and create a change by altering the program and speech of the list, but their attempts were unsuccessful and rejected.

> *"When I tried to ask questions about this subject they laughed at me. They answered sarcastically claiming this subject is not important, and what is important is reaching to the council, saying "then you can do what you think is appropriate", justifying their opinion by saying that without the family and its support and without agreements with other families, the list will fail".*

Khawla reinforces this content by saying:

> *"Although I am a member of a national party, I was recruited to the list because I am a woman and a Muslim, and it brings more votes. It is important to question the role and responsibility of women in refuting sectarianism, if they accept candidacy within this system".*

Loai confirms the existence of sectarian considerations in the elections, saying:

> *"I am Christian when the majority of the citizens in town are Druze. Even though I am a non-sectarian person and I believe in an agenda that serves everyone in my town, I was forced to adopt a sectarian approach to win the votes of the Christian voters, otherwise the chances of my election are scarce. I believed that as soon as I will win I will fight this system".*

In this context, Saleem says:

> *"There are three sects in my town, and sectarianism plays a central role in the elections for council. I am a non-sectarian person who believes in a non-sectarian agenda, therefore I paid a toll for this in the previous elections, as I did not succeed because members of my sect elected candidates who adopted a sectarian approach, and this is unfortunate".*

Saleem adds:

> *"In the last elections I realized that it is not possible to win without a sectarian approach, even indirectly or not publicly, so I had to address members of my sect according to their convictions and principles, as well as members of other sects, so that they do not feel threatened by me, and to convince them that I will take care of all their interests to the same extent".*

Sectarian considerations of party lists have also emerged within non-sectarian parties, or so they see themselves at least. In this context Wisam says:

> *"Sectarianism plays a central role in local elections. Even though I am a member of a national party, we considered when we formed the list that it represents all sectors to gain votes, and unfortunately, this is the case with all national parties".*

5.3. Absence of a feminist agenda

Participants in the research also addressed the lack of a feminist agenda in electoral campaigns and in the action plans of competing lists in the elections as a factor that influences the participation and candidacy of women. Before going into the views of the participants, there is a need to distinguish between two levels; the first is related to the feminist agenda. By this we mean the extent to which a feminist agenda is present in the electoral programs of presidential candidates or candidates for membership lists, how they work according to this agenda if it exists, and who is responsible for creating this agenda- women, or men, or both? The second level relates to the presence/representation of women in local politics, i.e. the proportion of their participation in relation to the nature and extent of this participation.

Although we did not directly examine the subject with the participants in the research, the issue emerged clearly when women and men mentioned disparity in understanding, knowing and defining feminist issues. The distinction between feminist agenda and female agenda[8] was not clear to most male and female participants. There was disparity in understanding the essence and meaning of "feminist agenda" versus "female agenda", or the definition of what is considered as feminist causes compared to female issues. It should be noted that this disparity emerged in comparison between men and women, and also among women themselves. Disparity emerged among the participants also in regard to the question of who is responsible for bringing the feminist/female agenda to local and general politics?

None of the participants had clear answers about the existence of female agendas in their electoral programs or in the overall program of their lists. The responses ranged from "there is no mention of women in the electoral program or in the program of the list" to "the electoral program and/or program of the list addresses women's issues and proposes programs that nurtures women".

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8 We mean "female agenda" here as dealing with issues traditionally associated with women, while "feminist agenda" seeks to combat marginalization of women and seeks gender equality in decisionmaking and resource allocation. In terms of "local politics", we mean working with women on all issues relating to the town, such as land, housing, structural maps and infrastructure, and not limited to education, children and welfare, as well as combating women oppression of different kinds, in particular by physical, sexual and economic violence.

However, when asked about the existence of a specific program, participants in the research found it difficult to present detailed programs on the pretext that they did not remember details, or that women on the list were more familiar with this issue. When we requested to see the written program, we were not able to obtain it from those who claimed it existed. This confirms that addressing women's issues has been from a narrow point of view, that did not consider improving the status of women as a collective responsibility like other issues and was often justified on the pretext that women understand more about these topics. For example, Saher, a mayor says:

> "I do not understand women's issues and concerns. This is an area that women need to work on and take responsibility for developing. Conversely, I support what women in my town are doing to improve this situation, and I participate in most women's programs and events, and a lot has been accomplished in this area".

As Saher is satisfied with the situation, Maher, a member of his council, disagrees with him, claiming that the current situation is not satisfying, however, he agrees with him about the existence of issues that are restricted to women:

> "There are no women's programs in the local authority, there are programs that are organized randomly by women of the town, for example: recreational programs, trips, conferences, sports, Zumba. Thecouncil can support some of these programs, but that is not enough, women should take a greater role".

All the female participants in the research, including members of political parties or independent lists, confirmed that their experience has shown that the issue of women's representation and attention to their issues in local authorities' elections was relegated to the women on the list, as if this mattered to women only. Often, there was no feminist agenda in the program of the list, but to gain points, they welcomed the idea of women taking up the task. In this context, says Mariam:

> "The list did not have a clear program for women based on a previous study, and the subject was mentioned only in public meetings and only to show that the list has nominated a woman for the second place. The head of the list did not speak of any feminist agenda, and the task was assigned to me because I am a woman. I had a clear feminist agenda, although it was not written, and I made sure to take every opportunity, mainly during all electoral women home circles, to raise women's issues,

stressing that this was the first time a woman had been nominated in a realistic place in my town".

Part of the participants of the research have come to realize that female feminist agenda means much more than just having an interest in traditional female issues, and that real representation of women means that women are intertwined in all aspects of life. In this context, Samar says:

"My feminist agenda has included issues of concern to the entire community, but dealing with it was from a feminist perspective, such as issues of land and housing, infrastructure, transportation, eliminating family systems, building youth cultural institutions and extracurricular frameworks. I have a clear political attitude towards occupation, increasing women's representation, bringing back the town's structural map and solving the housing crisis. This is because I believe that you cannot separate feminist agenda from social or patriotic agendas".

Abeer agrees with the above statement in saying:

"The party tried to force me to intervene in matters that concern women only and not to deal with public issues such as education, land, and housing... claiming that I do not have the experience to go into other cases, and that a woman should take care of women's issues. For me it was a slap in the face, because it reveals hypocrisy and false slogans".

While reality shows both the absence of women's programs and the restriction of these programs, most participants believe that women are responsible for creating change, with the support of men in the local authority. Saher says:

"There is a missing link in the local authority. The absence of a female member in the local council causes an absence of women's causes and programs. We do not know of women's causes and problems; therefore, women should take more active role, and men should help them".

Wisam, a member of municipal council representing a national list, disagrees with this, as thinks that the absence of women and women's issues is a social priority everyone must take responsibility for changing. For example, this can be achieved during the elections by setting a feminist agenda and ensuring women's candidacy in guaranteed positions, or in post elections by working to raise women's issues and trying to solve them in the local authority. Wisam says in this regard:

> *"When I became a municipal member, I took the role of monitoring sexual harassments towards women as requested by the mayor's legal advisor for women issues, and I followed the matter of women's appointments in new jobs in the municipality, and that is what actually happened".*

Wisam adds:

> *"Most lists do not tackle women's issues, even party lists, as they only care about public issues. The lists must follow a policy of corrective preference and choose women to be nominated in guaranteed positions and provide them with a platform in the elections to propose feminist, social and political issues, and to declare these issues in a feminist voice. We must abandon traditional stereotypes and work to integrate women in all fields".*

When Raif was asked why women were not nominated in guaranteed places in local electoral lists, he justified it by saying that it was difficult to convince women to run, claiming that their circumstances did not allow it. Khalid, who stressed the difficulty of finding women, agrees:

> *"I approached many women and young females asking them to join the list, especially as they carry enlightened thought against chauvinism and impedance, but they refused to join. Those who did accept to enlist stipulated their nomination in low places in the list".*

To summarize, we can say that even women and women's nomination supporters contend that women candidates are the ones responsible for pushing forward a women's agenda while simultaneously limiting their role in this field, and blaming women for their lack of political power by claiming that there are no women who want to run. They make these claims without any explanation related to the structure of society, or the general structure of parties or lists which ignore this subject until the elections arrive.

5.4. Lack of competencies

In the context of the women's agenda, women raised the issue of female qualifications required for running for local authority as another factor that limits the candidacy of women in the elections. Interestingly, this issue was addressed mainly by women, and only one or two men addressed it, a fact which requires stopping and examining this issue and looking into how and to which extent it affects the candidacy of women in local government.

The issue of women's qualifications is a major challenge, in part because some women believe that engaging in political work requires special and appropriate abilities and competencies, unlike most men who may be candidates without adequate professional or academic qualifications. Men depend primarily on their social capital, usually from their family or sectarian affiliation. Women's belief in their own need for high qualifications may be attributed to some women's subconscious understanding of the concept of political work and the idea that it is considered as an area suitable for men only, as if men are born instinctively with these qualifications and are not expected to prove themselves.

Miral related to this issue and says:

> "We are facing the challenge of proving competence in political work, while men who are engaged with politics are looked at as if they were born having this capacity. It is expected from women to have special and clear capabilities to enter the portal of political action, and to prove and show these capabilities. From my experience, I noticed that this often stands in the way of women, because they expect themselves to be 100 percent ready".

Miral adds:

> "Women must be role models in everything, and they must have abilities and knowledge in political work, but men also must have abilities and competencies, and we must not be lenient with them just because they are men. I do not want weak incompetent women. F\or example, one of my friends was nominated in a membership list but she knew nothing about political or local work. Women should refuse to be nominated only because they are women, because we aim at improving the situation, not to preserve it as it is".

Reem confirmed this approach and says:

> "When I was a candidate I thought that my experience in social work was enough. I did not have any experience or knowledge of politics and political dynamics, not even in media, which is considered a central factor in elections".

Reem adds:

> "eventually, my experience was good, but I would not repeat it without acquiring whatever skills and competencies needed. We women must not approach politics without learning about it, as it increases our chances to succeed and improves our performance".

On the other hand, when men mentioned women's competencies, this was in the context of their claim that women with qualifications do not want to run for elections because they are successful in other areas, do not want to risk their achievements by engaging in a non-professional unsuitable field, or will not have enough time.

It was remarkable that while women focused on the importance of qualifications and competencies in whoever intends to engage in politics, men only addressed the issue in the context of stating the refusal of qualified women to pursue politics. Women also dealt with this subject from a self-critical point of view, especially those who were engaged with politics without prior study. These women considered that participating in politics would not contribute to improving the status of women, but rather would merely contribute to the non-professional nature of the existing political. On the other hand, women stressed that just experimenting was an opportunity to learn and gain the necessary skills. This raises the question of what is optimal? How can we encourage women who are competent to engage in politics? Is it really necessary to expect women to run only if they have all the competencies, or can we be satisfied with good enough level of competence as a first step?

5.5. The involvement of political parties in chauvinist and family structures during elections

Arab parties did not take the role expected and desired from them in terms of promoting women's representation in local authorities, a role which parties could have pioneered by establishing the rules of change and working to reduce the factors driving women away from local politics and reducing their chances of being nominated. Moreover, in many cases, the parties themselves were engaged in the system that produced these factors and followed the same traditional path taken by other lists in order to ensure victory in the elections. In other words, rather than fighting the dominant chauvinistic, clan, and sectarian system, the parties themselves often relied on it and took it into account in their local election campaigns. On the other hand, although there has been a slight change in recent years in the nomination of women on local parties' electoral lists, the parties did not make enough effort to have women candidates in guaranteed positions. We exclude from this the parties in big cities such as Nazareth, where the number of guaranteed seats exceeds three seats and more.

Khawla, a candidate for a political party with a liberal agenda, says on this regard:

> *"The responsibility of national parties is great, and in my opinion, they are*
> *primarily responsible for the lack of women in politics. The parties did not*

really urge women to run because of prevailing family and sectarian considerations. Women's representation must be principled and applied on the ground, not just as a slogan".

Khawla adds:

"The parties should have secured a place for women. As long as women's representation is not guaranteed, and there is not enough community support for this issue, the solution is to secure guaranteed positions for women".

In this context, Suheir says:

"Although I am a member to a liberal national party that believes in women's representation in local authorities, the party's vote is based on power relations, interests and agreements, and this was obvious when they suggested that I run, but unfortunately, not in a guaranteed place. When I asked to be nominated in the second place in the list, I was strongly opposed, although I have a long repertoire in community and political work. The party's excuse was that it had considerations of votes, claiming that there is nothing against me".

She adds:

"If I belonged to a larger family and guaranteed more votes, it would have been possible to nominate me in an a more advanced position".

Abed, a municipal member representing a political party, says:

"Yes, the parties must be blamed for not guaranteeing women's political representation, however, the problem lies not only in the parties, but on women as well. I personally asked female political activists to nominate themselves in a guaranteed position, but they refused claiming that they do not have time to do so".

Eventually, there is only one fact, and it is that parties have not often nominated women in guaranteed positions, and the question remains of the reason behind it. Is it really absence of women who are ready and willing to run? Have parties really made the effort to look for appropriate candidates, or is it because there is no real intention among men of the party to favor women? In any case, the question remains: why have the parties not worked to prepare women candidates over the years?

6 Discussion and summary

This research presents the composite experience of Palestinian women activists in local politics, in the shadow of a traditional chauvinistic society that excludes them and discriminates against them in all spheres of life, and in the shadow of a racist state that pursues policies of discrimination and exclusion against the indigenous Arab minority.

Several studies have dealt with the representation of women in public life, in politics and in local government, but the peculiarity of this research, in addition to its study and analysis of the reality of the compound oppression of Arab women, lies in its close attention to women's representation impediments and the translation of these impediments from the point of view of women themselves. The research relies not only on literature, scientific and academic analysis that dealt with the issue of obstacles to the representation of women, but goes beyond to address these obstacles based on data stemming from the lived experiences of women who have been involved as candidates for local elections. By emphasizing their own agency and challenging these obstacles in different ways, women aim to develop their ability to resist the prevailing culture that marginalizes them. On the one hand, the particularity of this research lies in the integration of women's experiences with men's experiences, which enriched the research in terms of the quantity and content of the information, and diversified the topics and issues raised by the participants. On the other hand, the similarities and differences between men and women, in terms of their vision and analysis of the same topics and issues, raises many additional issues that we will now address in this section.

It can be argued that the added value of this research relates to identifying the obstacles as presented by men, allowing us an in-depth understanding of the factors that limit the candidacy of women to local governance and to offer practical and realistic solutions to remove these obstacles. The research has shown that the Palestinian society in Israel is a composite society with regard to its attitudes on women, women's status, and women's role in the public sphere, including local authorities. Therefore, in our view, a comprehensive understanding of any repressive context for women and their social treatment cannot be completed without direct dialogue with all relevant components of society, including the oppressive components, including men, particularly those who follow the prevailing traditional chauvinistic approach.

It should also be noted that the participation of women in the research enabled them to retrieve their experiences and re-live them in their most precise details, but this time from a critical point of view. This memory retrieval process was often accompanied by mixed feelings- such as regrets that they aim to resist and hopes that they seek to strengthen. The participating women stressed the importance of recounting their personal experiences and learning from the experiences of the other women, especially the learning from the experiences of women who succeeded despite all obstacles. This data alone is an achievement of some of the research objectives.

It is important to note that this research is not an academic research in the traditional sense, but rather a feminist one. It not only adopts the feminist methodology through which we conduct research, but also seeks to create a change. The results and insights of the research will become a basis for our work with women, and our work with different social and political institutions.

The results of the research confirmed some of our impressions from our work in the field with women partners. For example, the effects of social chauvinism and tradition, and the consequential social norm that political work and participation in the public domain are considered as work for men only, and the normalization of women's exclusion from these spheres. We also validated our impression that the Palestinians in Israel, being an indigenous minority working in a political system that practices national oppression and political discrimination and excludes the Palestinian society from decision-making positions and the allocation of resources, reinforces the exclusion of women, which makes the local authority the only place that enables access to power and influence, thus increasing male competition and empowering tribal and sectarian concepts embedded within chauvinistic thought.

Women also pointed that the electoral system is violent and includes practices that alienate women, which greatly limits the participation of women. In addition, election management is conducted in a chauvinistic manner that does not take into account the circumstances of women or the roles imposed on them by society, therefore, meetings are planned according to male criteria. The research also confirmed that the elections are run mainly on a family or sectarian basis, sometimes with both of them intertwined, which inhibits voters from seeing women as an option. Women often accept these criteria, even if they do not believe in them and want to change them, but they conform to gain membership in the

council. This same culture continues in the council during the electoral cycle, as women are marginalized in meetings and decision-making.

Female participants in the research indicated that many women also prefer men over women in these jobs, therefore do not elect women or support them. While we have seen that some men consider it important to involve women in politics and decisionmaking positions, others have reservations about some of the jobs that they find unsuitable for women, because they consider women having "too much dignity" to be involved in dirty political work, and therefore exclude women in the name of sparing them these jobs. Activists from national parties indicated that in some cases their parties had colluded with the system. At best, national parties did not engage with family and sectarian practices in the elections, and in other cases they dealt with them by either nominating men based on their family or sect affiliation, or through alliances with family or sectarian lists. Even when women were nominated, national parties took into consideration their family or sectarian backgrounds.

The results of the research indicate that there is an almost total absence of feminist agendas in the electoral lists. We did not find among the participants in the research any who dealt with feminist agendas in their list's objectives or in their electoral programs. Some did not address feminist issues at all, while others addressed them ostensibly without detailed implementable programs aimed at raising the status of women or ushering women into public participation. Within this range of scenarios, the responsibility for setting a feminist agenda or addressing women's needs was always put onto the shoulders of women themselves. Additionally, we have identified a widespread lack of understanding of what we mean by a "feminist agenda" versus a "women's agenda," and sometimes ignorance or a clear objection such agendas.

The disparities in understanding also appeared among women, and most of the women participants also placed these responsibilities on women. The research also pointed out that there are women who perceive that they do not have the competencies of political work, first, because they see the importance of political action and the need for professional and responsible work, and secondly, because they subconsciously think that political action requires masculine skills. It is remarkable that men do not ask this question about themselves, and they are satisfied with their social and political capital based on their family and sect, and their place within them.

It can be said that the above topics, which were identified in the research, raise three central issues that we must study and analyze in order to deal with the obstacles that we discussed above. These central issues are:

▪ Changing the culture of local government and elections

According to the study, chauvinist culture and the prevailing culture of corruption and power in the local authorities constitute fundamental and structural obstacles to the participation of Arab women in local government and their representation in local councils. The prevailing culture in local government revolves around two main axes: the first relates to the performance and behavior of the local authority, and here it emerged clearly that the local authority is looked at mainly in a negative manner, because it is an institution that suffers from numerous internal crises, with one of the most predominant issues being favoritism and preference of personal interests over the public interest. The second axis concerns the fact that the local authority and the electoral system adopt direct chauvinist approaches, which are manifested by clan, family and sectarian systems, as well as traditional chauvinistic violence in all its forms. This includes verbal and physical violence, which can even lead to attempted murder and serious damage to property.

The electoral system, in its present state, is the result of the culture prevailing on both axes. It is this culture that often produces, of course, heads and members of a local authority who have similar characteristics and chauvinist elements in their approaches and share the commonality of improper performances. If not changed radically, they will further exclude women from participation in local government. We see, of course, a direct dialectical relationship between the two axes, which forces us to change the performance of the local authority and in parallel change its chauvinist approach.

The dominant culture with its above-mentioned axes was considered an important and influential factor for women who were nominated and suffered as a result of this culture. Some of the women expressed their unwillingness to re-run because of this dominant culture. Others said that this culture was a direct reason for their resignation from the local authority after becoming members. It should also be noted that violence during the elections and in the local authority can lead to a loss of familial support for women in the course of their candidacy or in their work as members of local authority, because they are subjected to and influenced by violence directly or indirectly. This way women lose one of the most important supporting factors that constitutes a source of power for them (we mean the core family composed of a husband, children and siblings).

Men who participated in the research also stressed that the two above-mentioned axes constitute a real obstacle for women to run for local authority. Instead of proposing an alternative and taking direct social responsibility for changing these obstacles, they said that increasing the numerical representation of women in local government, if it ever increased, will contribute for making some change, without addressing the paradox of the difficulty of increasing the representation of women in local government under the prevailing culture. In our view, this approach, which negates the issue of changing the prevailing system and culture in local government from political agendas, and does not perceive this change as a general social responsibility rather than a task of women, enshrines the current situation and does not contribute to a fundamental and structural change. Increasing the numerical representation of women without changing the prevailing culture (which in itself is difficult to achieve without breaking the circle of this culture) can lead to frustration and the loss of hope of some female members of the local authorities for the possibility of change. This culture also explains the resignation of some women from local authority councils after they endured the hardships of running and winning, as the culture both pushes women to engage in the system for the benefit of lists but also forces them to act as dictated by its chauvinist values. It should be noted here that this reveals an initial dilemma as feminists regarding the usefulness of our participation in a system that, at the present moment and in the foreseeable near future, is very resistant to radical change. On the one hand, we can see that women's candidacy in local authorities and their participation in the prevailing chauvinist culture gives the dominant group, i.e. men, the ability to use women in order to portray themselves as liberal and enlightened groups, while using women to conceal their attempts to maintain the chauvinistic approach and prevailing culture. In contrast, the lack of participation of women may be construed by the dominant group as a waiver of their right to political representation, which will give them the legitimacy to continue with this approach, claiming that women themselves do not initiate participation and blaming them, and further arguing that attempts to find women to run were not successful.

Thus, we see clearly that changing this system in its current context, is primarily the concern of women who do not adhere to the prevailing system and thought. This reinforces our orientation as a feminist association and our work towards nurturing and bringing about true women's representation, which places importance on both quantitative representation and substantive representation. On the one hand, a larger number of women, merely because they are women, is necessary to oblige the local authority to pay attention to feminist and female issues, but on the other hand, quantitative representation cannot alone bring about the desired change without working in parallel to create a binding public culture that requires the examination of all decisions and steps of local authority in line with feminist trends and needs. This must take place in all cases, even if the appropriate quantitative representation of women is absent. However, we believe that increasing the quantitative representation of women can be the first stage towards changing the prevailing culture. Feminist association working in this field can use the quantitative presence of women, through the development of action plans with these women that aim to strengthen their political skills, so that their representation will become essential rather than visual. The presence of a larger number of women must be accompanied by a belief in change, and their ability to work to achieve it, especially in light of the immense challenges and the absence of men who are ready, in word and deed, to change the prevailing culture.

We seek to ensure that women's presence is effective and influencing, and not merely a decoration for the lists and the local authority, that is, women are present in all levels and fields and are empowered to raise their issues. It is not enough to deal with direct or specific women's needs. The representative body (in our research- the local authority) must have a gender-sensitive culture in its overall performance and decisions, and must have structural policies and frameworks that ensure this culture's continuity at all levels and in all circumstances. Here we face another puzzle regarding our position on women candidates within family or sectarian lists, and how to deal with such electives at the stage of candidacy or after. In principle, we are against the nomination of women on such lists, even if these women are against the system itself and chose it because of the lack of possibilities and alternatives. The experience of female participants as shown in the research confirms the difficulty to make change through being on such lists. On the other hand, as confirmed by most women in the research, this experience developed within them a sense of criticism and awareness of the importance of their role being actually effective and influential, and this experience provided

them with tools and skills they could have not acquired without running. Hence, although we oppose running on these lists, we believe that if these women reach local authority, we must cooperate with them and provide a supportive framework for them, because our battle for change should not be waged by standing against the women who did not find any other strategy for electoral victory, but by supporting them and developing their thought and enhancing their awareness of the concepts of society and individuality, rather than family and community.

It seems clear, through us talking about changing a whole system and a prevailing culture, that we see the need to work - in addition to working with women themselves - with other target groups that believe in the need for change but do not take an active role to create it. These groups should be urged to make a change, and convinced to make this their social concern because change benefits society. Here we mean, to name but a few actors, a large group of men and male youth who do not belong to the chauvinistic family system prevailing in the local authority and have all the competencies to run or even to work within the prevailing system. We see importance in pushing them to be engaged in elections to work through them to change the prevailing system to improve the status of women and increase women's representation, and to not allow the arena to be dominated by people who are difficult to work with on these issues. This men and male youth should have full knowledge that their chances for winning elections, although much greater than the chances of women, is still less than the chances of candidates produced by clan, family and sect systems. Unfortunately, as of now people who believe in the need for change in the prevailing culture are the ones who are reluctant to go through the experience of running for local authority, for the same reasons as women, and here we mean the unwillingness to integrate into a system that contradicts their convictions and principles and is difficult to change. Here in particular, comes our role to work with them and to convince them to confront the system despite all difficulties. We fully understand their reluctance but we also see the importance of not surrendering and escaping from these difficulties.

Working to change the prevailing culture must be systematic and comprehensive throughout time and not limited to the few months before the elections. In our opinion, it is not possible to change the culture of elections and local authority without creating cultural change in the Arab society as a whole. Therefore, it is necessary to work in parallel at the general level, that is, in the society in all its segments, especially those with human and behavioral characteristics that reject the dominant chauvinistic system, which, if found in decision-making positions

and in an official position, will have an effective role in supporting women's causes and their essential representation in local government. As for women, they should be given support and confidence required to face the reality and to challenge it with their own strengths and by organizing collectively as leading women, i.e. to support the presence of female leadership at the forefront of local lists or in institutions in order to ensure women's presence at all stages of candidacies and post-elections. Efforts must be intensified among all social institutions and leadership to build omprehensive action plans and programs that address the phenomena inherent in the two axes of the prevailing culture, including the phenomenon of rampant violence that accompanies the electoral process in Arab society. It is worth mentioning here that feminist frameworks must play a more active role in combating societal violence, in parallel with their efforts to combat violence against women in general, and institutional violence in particular, which are major factors for women's exclusion in political and public decision-making circles.

In addition to following up the work done by Kayan and other feminist associations to raise awareness of gender sensitivity and the status of women and their representation in decision-making positions, it is also necessary to intensify and increase the work with the local authorities, their administration and membership, and to convince them that changing their culture and structure will have a positive impact on women's willingness to nominate themselves, and the society's readiness to support women candidates.

The issue of working with new and diverse target groups brings us to another issue concerning the role and responsibility of men versus the role and responsibility of women in changing this reality.

▪ The responsibility of men and women to remove impediments to women's candidacy and representation in local government

The research has proven, confirming the findings of other research mentioned earlier, clear support for the representation of women in local government. However, if the attitudes of Arab society, including those from the male population, are supportive of participation of women in local authorities, why is the situation still the same in terms of their low representation and their mainly negative evaluation of the post-election period? On the one hand, we have seen a positive attitude towards the status of women and their achievements compared to their status years ago, but on the other hand, there has been a skeptical view of the change, claiming that it is only symbolic, and does not reflect a social shift or any

real structural change in the chauvinistic culture or the family and sectorial systems. In our view, this is due to several reasons, including that men, including those of them who are enlightened, have no responsibility to change this reality, whether regarding women directly or in regard to public and societal matters. In addition, our society has not yet internalized the danger, repercussions, and consequences of women's inferior social status, and it still considers gender-inequality as solely a woman's issue, casting the responsibility for change on women only. Men who claim dissatisfaction with the chauvinist system and the prevailing culture, and that do support women and encourage their representation in local authorities, have not taken any steps, even at the level of the list, and have continued the prevailing approach. We add to this the role of women and the role of feminist institutions who must evaluate their work and learn from previous experiences to improve and develop more effective action plans for removing obstacles at all levels. Therefore, it is necessary to work to change the stereotypical thought of men and women alike, which considers feminist work as restricted to women, limited to topics that are directly and exclusively related to women, and defines women's issues as those related to women's current status in society (e.g. issues related to children, family, health, education and teaching). Other issues, such as planning, construction, and infrastructure, are considered solely within the purview of men.

According to our concept of feminist work, we would like to clarify that we perceive feminism and feminist work as different from feminine work. Feminism is about intellectual and philosophical perceptions aiming to understand the roots and the reasons for distinction between men and women, aiming to enhance the conditions of women, and to increase their opportunities in every field. This transcends the "naïve" perception of equality between the two sexes in quantitative terms, because we seek to create a shift that establishes equality between genders under a new social order, in which men and women, as individuals or groups, live in communities as human beings in harmony with the natural world, based on complete social and economic equality, with full human rights, and without conflicts or violence. This is different from our view of the concept of feminine work, which is limited to ideas and actions that concern a group of women interested only in women's affairs, but does not seek a omprehensive change, knowing that feminine work is part of feminist work and intersect with it. Therefore, feminism goes beyond being a discipline and thought only. It is a political movement that operates in the field and proceeds from in-depth study and analysis of the causes and roots of the distinction between

men and women in all spheres of life, thus adopting its own perceptions and projects to overcome them. This requires the development of women leaders who have the necessary competencies, capacities and tools to enable them to raise their causes and their representation in society generally and in the local authority in particular. However, this must be accomplished without casting the responsibility for change on women only, but on every segment in society, and through working with women for the benefit of all. However, in order to encourage the society to take its role, it is necessary to intensify efforts and invest in working with women to bridge the gap between women and men, which has been carried out by Kayan and some feminist frameworks for many years. Following this work, women must develop their own work and involve the other segments of society, encouraging them to take responsibility and to take an active role in the process of bringing about the desired societal change.

When we discuss social responsibility for increasing the representation of women, as mentioned above, instead of taking responsibility, men clearly cast their blame on women and attribute the reasons for low representation of women on women only, justifying it with different reasons. We see this thinking as chauvinist and exclusionary, enshrining the status quo and escaping responsibility. Even if good faith exists, societal change needs tremendous efforts. Those who do not make the effort cannot declare themselves as committed to the representation of women, because obligation must be through action. In our opinion, no election candidate should be required to have power or physical strength in order to deal with violence. What is required is an intensive community movement to change the culture of violence and develop methods to deal with it. In addition, work must be done to develop criteria for the selection of men by their competencies, as the largest proportion of men members of local councils are often in these councils for corruptive reasons, and for favoritism and family influence and financial power that comes with elections. The subject of competencies is a fundamental issue for us. As mentioned in the research, it concerns women more than men, which is in line with the fact that there are few qualified people in the local Arab authorities. Without question, we do not support the nomination of people devoid of qualifications, even if they were women, but, in parallel, the opportunity must be equal to all candidates, and high competencies must not be used as a "barrier" with women only. The application of this thought exclusively on women is unfair and consecrates the status quo. Having competencies is a social requirement that concerns all social segments, knowing that the required competencies are those that qualify a member or a head of a local authority to perform a job that is publicly

and legally entrusted to them.

We believe that the female public includes enough qualified women, and the claim that there are no women with competencies is nothing but a verbal tax and a feeble argument to perpetuate the status quo, which is a claim that can be put upon on those who think this way. Therefore, we see that the solution is conditioned by the readiness of society to accept women in politics, which requires taking responsibility by men and women alike. In this context, we stress the importance of working to deal with a phenomenon that we have noticed many women have, which is internalizing the idea that they lack appropriate competencies to work in local politics.

We will intensify our work with women to enhance their confidence in themselves and the confidence of their community in them. This is what Kayan is doing and will continue to develop through national and local forums that empower women in their work for creating local change, through accompanying women in the process of brainstorming and sharing successful experiences and the challenges they face, and training women to appear in the public sphere and on public occasions as spokespersons and leaders who participate in decision-making processes and visible leaders who publicly raise their voices.

▪ The role of political parties- marginal or influential/disruptive?

A disappointment and frustration of political parties regarding their performance in the representation of women in local government has been evident in the research. It was clear that this disappointment is due to expectations that political parties, unlike family and sectarian lists, will have a role in changing the system of local authority elections in terms of increasing the quantitative and substantive representation of women in local government and adopting a feminist agenda in the decisions of local authorities. These expectations have been reinforced by the liberal principles and agendas of human rights and women's rights, which have long been declared by secular parties, some of which reflected these values in the composition of their party lists in recent parliamentary elections. In fact, from the point of view of the female participants in the research, including members of political parties, the reality proved that these parties did not meet expectations, and actually played a negative role in the consolidation of the prevailing system. It should be noted that we appreciate the representation of women in political parties, and the concern of The National Democratic Assembly (Balad) and The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash), and recently the Northern Wing

of Islamic Movement to secure places for women within their bodies. We also appreciate the presence of two Arab women members of the Knesset after the last parliamentary elections.

We know that political parties are often ineffective in local authority elections. However, we see that they have not fulfilled their societal duties even in the narrow capacity they occupy in these elections, and we think that they should take such a role very seriously because changing local culture and involving women in local decisionmaking is no less important than in the national political sphere.

Focusing on parties comes from our belief that it may be the first and strongest possibility, within the few existing possibilities, that can ensure women's representation on electoral lists, because they are, at least according their declarations, non-family, non-sectarian and liberal. However, this has not yet happened on the ground.

We in Kayan will not be satisfied with only casting responsibility on the parties, despite the partial necessity of doing so. Thus, will go directly to the parties to raise the issue of increasing the representation of women and putting women's issues on their agendas, in word and deed. To achieve this, we will adopt working mechanisms that will enable us to follow up on the subject, assess progress on a permanent basis, and develop new and varied work strategies and alternatives in response to what is happening on the ground. It should be noted here that the responsibility for change in the performance of parties in the local elections also rests on women in the parties, who should initiate a revolution in the performance of their parties with regard to the representation of women in local authorities, with the same strength and determination that they show in their handling of general political issues.

We believe that change can be made through working with parties to translate their societal principles and convictions into reality, by nominating women on their lists in advanced and secured positions. This can lead to a change in the prevailing system on two levels. First, by encouraging women in general to face obstacles by nominating themselves and breaking the barrier of trust and frustration, and secondly, to present the positive performance of such parties as an example to the other relevant segments of society.

The results of the research conducted by Kayan has proven the need for concerted efforts in the framework of collective responsibility to remove all obstacles to

ensuring quantitative and substantial representation of Arab women in the councils of local authorities. In parallel, efforts must be intensified to empower and support women and give them the confidence and power to face obstacles and challenge reality.

The following are our recommendations to address the various constraints identified in the research and to increase the representation of women in local authorities. This means effective and influential representation that works towards transforming the prevailing culture and creating a gender-sensitive culture at all levels and in all causes.

1. Feminist associations and frameworks should initiate a comprehensive action strategy that ensures the participation and involvement of all segments, institutions and bodies in the Arab society (local authorities, political parties, the National Committee of Chairmen of Local Authorities, civil society in general, and women's associations in particular). This strategy seeks, first and foremost, real and lasting change in the chauvinist system, and in the culture of violence prevailing in our society in general and in local governance in particular. In this context, we see there an urgent need to develop holistic action plans with all segments of society, including supportive and enlightened men and male youth who are not fully involved in local political action. Theseprograms include campaigns for awareness raising, trainings and workshops to encourage these groups to take an active and influential role in combating the prevailing system and to support the representation of women.

2. Developing social field work at all levels, including improving the economic and social status of women, and nurturing effective and influential women leaders in all fields, locally and nationally, to form a grassroots women's in which women are present as a collective group, rather than just as individuals.

3. Women's associations and groups should provide a supportive framework for women who run for electoral campaigns in order to empower them as they confront obstacles and difficulties and to empower them not to surrender to the prevailing system. This support should not be only when women nominate themselves, but rather should be provided regularly to female members of the local authorities, regardless of how they became members, by developing programs that provide them with necessary professional and personal accompaniment, including the acquisition of skills, knowledge and tools to deepen their understanding of feminism and municipal works in all issues. In parallel, there

must be ongoing work with the local councils (members and leaders) to raise their awareness of gender sensitivity and feminist work to change the culture prevailing in local authorities, and they must be provided with the tools to take effective actions that go beyond mere statements.

4. At the same time, we demand social frameworks to take an active role towards women's issues and towards combating injustice. We stress the importance of feminist organizations in taking their role in all social issues, from a feminist point of view, that seeks to fulfill justice. This means that organizations and feminist frameworks must intensify and strengthen their involvement in pressing social issues, such as land and housing, unemployment and poverty, and the widespread violence within our society. In regards to violence, though gender based violence is most prevalent and targets women for the sole sake that they are women, it is still relevant to all segments of society and must be presented so.

5. We see that, in terms of working with Arab political parties, women's frameworks must develop their action plans at two levels. First, they must cooperation with parties that show a genuine desire to change the prevailing situation, and second, they must ensure accountability of parties that do not actually carry out any practical programs or steps to raise the status of women in general, and to increase their representation in local governance in particular. We also believe that it is essential for female party members to hold their parties accountable for everything they do or do not do to ensure representation of women in their bodies. Although party feminists have raised issues of women's representation at the level of party bodies and parliamentary representation, local action is still not sufficiently on the agenda of party feminists, either in changing the local prevailing culture or in representing women at the local level.

6. Continuing to work diligently with local and national frameworks and groups that work to influence local and public policies, such as the work of Kayan with the Jusur National Women's Forum[9], throughout the year to put women's issues on the social agenda and provide programs for women and the general public to reduce discrimination against women, and to empower women to develop as

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9 "Jusur" Forum is a women's national forum founded by Kayan Feminist Organization in 2008. It includes 35 women leaders that represent local women's groups from different Arab localities and mixed cities. Through the forum Kayan seeks to consolidate a feminist movement in the field that promotes awareness of Palestinian women's rights and advances their leadership in all fields, especially the social, and political.

active and influential leaders, and to increase their involvement in politics.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that we at Kayan will take into consideration the research outputs and recommendations and will start a course of planning followed by an implementation strategy in cooperation and partnership with local women groups and the Jusur national forum of Arab women leaders, along with a program for integrating

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Kayan feminist organization envisions a secure and just society free of gender-based discrimination, in which Arab Palestinian women in Israel enjoy full and equitable opportunities for self-actualization, and take a leading and active part in society through realizing their individual and collective rights. Kayan works towards this vision by consolidating an active, systematic, nationwide Arab Palestinian feminist movement that actively effects social change through contesting the root causes of gender-based discrimination, defending and promoting the rights of women, and ensuring their integration in decision-making positions in general.

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