

**Women in Politics Study:  
The Experience of Arab Women in Local Politics in Israel**  
*Executive Summary*

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Full study in Arabic available at:

<http://kayanfeminist.org/sites/default/files/publications/Kayan-Arab-Final.pdf>

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## **Executive Summary: Women in Politics Study**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this study is to observe and document the diverse experiences of Arab women who were elected as councilors in Israeli local authorities in October 2018. It attempts to capture a real-time picture of the experience of the women in the local council and to document it as a learning opportunity. The study is based entirely on the sitting women councilors' narratives, shared thoughts, conclusions, and reflections on each one of their experiences. Fifteen out of the 18 Arab women currently sitting as local councilors were interviewed.

The study proposes practical recommendations for women's organizations that are active in the field of women's political participation. It offers guidance and a framework for developing future programs and interventions aimed at supporting women elected to local authorities by providing information about skills, trainings, and opportunities for relationship building that would enhance their work. It also gives guidance on how to specialize these programs to fit the various agendas and commitments of the particular set of women candidates or councilors engaged by the program.

Finally, this study contributes to forming a reference for women who are considering engaging in politics in general and in the local authority in particular, so that they can have a more accurate and deeper sense of what it is like to experience political participation in local authorities.

### **Main Findings**

Fifty-three percent of the women members of the local councils participating in the study felt that they have been able to gain credibility and respected status in the local council, despite the difficulties and their limited ability to translate their position as a local councilor into concrete achievements and progress toward their goals.

"A difficult experience," was how 13 women out of 15 interviewees described their councillorship experience so far. Moreover, 73% of women councilors indicated that there is no supportive framework for them during their work in the local council, and *I am all alone in this battle* is the dominant feeling of the majority of women.

Only three councilors reported that they receive substantial and useful support for their work, either from civil society organizations or from political parties. Interestingly, these three

councilors evaluate their work as “positive” and feel that they have influence and are making progress toward achieving their goals. The clear difference between the experiences of women who receive regular support and those who do not is a factor worth emphasizing.

The group who suffers the most among the women is the councilors who are in the political opposition of the local council, due to the hostile and violent atmosphere that they experience as women, as well as the limits on their influence that they experience as part of the opposition.

The majority of women councilors were assigned by the local authority as members of committees that were seen as more suitable for women, such as the educational or women’s committees, instead of joining committees of their own choosing. These assignments were influenced both by patriarchal views of the local authority and political interest, as well as lack of preparation on the women’s parts to demand to join more influential committees. This has led to a notable absence of women in important committees, a fact that limits their ability to influence the work of the local authority.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the topics introduced and the information shared by the women councilors, we have identified several themes that have come out of this study and have set corresponding recommendations:

- **Theme: Women councilors aim to change the dominant work culture for the whole system in the local authority** to be more effective, transparent, fair, and professional; they want not only to raise women’s status or increase their representation in the local authority, but to serve all citizens equally and justly. The problem is not solely limited to women's absences from local authorities, but also lies in the absence of people with different visions, the lack of transparency and professionalism in decision making, and the predomination of familial and factional interests over the public interest. The women councilors are also deeply concerned with the political culture of silencing, marginalization, and even of violence towards those who oppose the coalition or the mayor.

**Recommendation:** Emphasize the necessity to change the dominant work system in the local authority, in public discourse, and through non-profit campaigns to encourage women’s political and electoral participation. Women politicians should focus early on finding partners and supporters who understand the importance of changing the whole system and will collaborate

with the woman leader upon election. Additionally, civil society and local community groups must be active in pressuring the local authorities to pressure the local authorities to abide by the relevant laws and regulations.

- **Theme:** Throughout the study, **women councilors repeatedly indicated the sense of loneliness they experience in their work** in the local council. Most of them pointed out that the groups who had worked with the candidate during the election campaign had almost disappeared after the election victory; now, each of them felt as if she were going through the battle alone. The survey also confirmed the pressing need for a peer-support network, especially one comprised of women.

**Recommendation:** Prepare the group, party, or list for the post-election phase, and emphasize the need to include people familiar with the day-to-day work of the local authority. It is recommended to plan the work of the supporting groups or parties to include both the phase of running for elections *and* the phase of the actually serving on the local council so that the responsibility for achieving success remains shared between the list and the candidate. In addition, it is recommended to organize regional meetings with other women councilors to have the chance to exchange experiences, questions, and challenges.

- **Theme: Working with the media** – most of the members referred to the fact that they do not publish their accomplishments in the media, and they rarely celebrate their work and achievements on social media platforms. There was a severe decrease in their media engagement as councilors compared to their candidacy period.

**Recommendation:** Develop the skills of the members in dealing with the media and appearing in its different forms, such as radio, television, news websites, and social media, and provide a consultative and training framework to support them in this area. In parallel, it is recommended to work with the media to encourage communication with the councilors and to ensure that women councilors are portrayed fairly in the media.

- **Theme: The challenge of fulfilling the various needs of the women councilors** – the women councilors expressed the difficulty of finding experts and professionals to accompany them in their dilemmas and inquiries about professional matters in the local authority in fields such as planning, budgeting, and employment. They also expressed that they needed help occasionally in conducting specific tasks, such as mapping studies, correspondence, or communicating with the public and the media.

**Recommendation:** Provide services and needed support under one framework/address that includes professional guidance and resources, such consultants, professionals, researchers, and people with expertise and experience in the work of the local authorities. A unified system could help the councilors to obtain opportunities for get support in a manner that suits their busy schedules, needs, and the nature of work they perform in local authority.