**Fraught Journeys to Success: Palestinian Career Women in Israel**

**Book Proposal**

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**Book Synopsis**

This book tells the story of career women among the Palestinian citizens of Israel (hereafter PCI), in three professional branches: medical doctors, lawyers, and high-tech engineers. Covering three occupational generations – university students, women five years following graduation, and those with ten years or more of professional seniority – we portray a new and rapidly growing category of women. Their stories, moreover, also provide a lens onto the Palestinian middle-class that has developed amid deepening poverty and a continuous personal and collective security crisis. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 45 women, evenly divided between the three professions and the three occupational generations. Analysis is further supported by the first author's cumulative ethnographic fieldwork among different PCI communities, and by the second author's hands-on acquaintance as a professional career woman and a member of PCI society.

The feminist anthropological scholarship on women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been a burgeoning sub-field, dynamic and diverse thematically and theoretically. As outlined in several review publications over the years (Abu-Lughod 1989, Charrad 2011, Deeb and Wingar 2012, Hafez and Slymovics 2013), anthropological studies of the MENA region have come a long way from the Orientalist perspectives that characterized the early scholarship of the area, with its focus on tribes and rural communities. Much in line with contemporary ethnographic preoccupations, the topics have diversified immensely to include subjectivity, body, gender and sexuality, multiple modernities, multiple Islams, post-colonialism, and more. The ethnographic scholarship about Arab and Muslim women has likewise become very alert to culturalist slippages. Over the past four-odd decades, foci have shifted from documenting women's voices, through illuminating their roles as bearers of tradition and collective identity, to problematizing – politicizing and historicizing – key metaphors that preoccupied the old anthropological discourse about the MENA, notably honor and shame, female genital cutting, virginity, the hijab, and of course patriarchy. Much attention has been dedicated to de-essentializing Arab and Muslim women, de-bunking their image as categorically oppressed, highlighting differences among them, and celebrating their agency (e.g., Abu-rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy 2013, Abu-Lughod 2015, McLarney 2021).

More recently, though, and parallel to these scholarly preoccupations, which are ongoing, a growing number of feminist anthropological studies of the MENA region are looking into "aspects of selfhood that escape from the structures, rules, systems, and discursive limits of life but captures imaginations, aspirations, desires, yearnings, and longings" (Sehlikoglu 2018: 73). These include lifestyles, consumption culture, intimacy, and sexualities, which go hand in hand with the increasing focus on urban and middle-class settings. The present book on career women among the Palestinian citizens of Israel aims to contribute to this growing literature. We document the journeys of upwardly mobile professional women among a subjugated national minority who is experiencing a historical moment of intense paradoxical nature: PCI are second-class citizens in the state that uprooted and continues to oppress their national group, and who has subjected them to decades-long discrimination, marginalization, and structural violence. Yet four decades into Israel's neoliberal turn, they are now facing new educational and economic opportunities, partly backed by state policies and state funding, and despite persistent high poverty levels that characterize their society at large, many among them are immersed in hyper-consumerist middle-class lifestyles.

The anthropology of Palestinians, and PCI more specifically, has dedicated much attention to the repercussions of their historical and political oppression (Furani and Rabinowitz 2011, Atshan 2021). Within this body of work, feminist anthropologists have explored a broad array of topics, among them their multi-layered forms of resistance, the intersecting effects of death and grief, women's political and civic engagements, women's work, citizenship, and of course kinship. Alongside these, there has developed a significant body of ethnographic works on gender and sexuality, including women and femininity, men and masculinity, and queer politics, sexuality, and representations (e.g., Peteet 1994, Kanaaneh 2002, 2008, Sa'ar 2006, Sa'ar and Yahya-Younis 2013, Atshan 2020). More recently, and in keeping with the trends outlined above, studies of PCI too have started to document their emergent middle class, urban lifestyles, leisure, and consumer culture. Recent studies cover sports, both professional and popular, food culture, modest fashion, middle-class mothering, the lives and concerns of university students and professional women, cultural industries, as well as topics that have become prevalent in psychological anthropology more broadly, notably self and subjectivity, personhood, and emotional pedagogies.

The present book on high-achieving PCI women in lucrative professions taps into this growing current. Medical doctors, lawyers, and engineers, whose numbers have jumped over the past decade or so, are central and valued actors in the evolving middle-class among the Palestinian Citizens of Israel. As we show, their professional journeys comprise a mixture of pride, ambitions, sense of accomplishment, joy, challenges, and struggles. To understand how they maneuver this intensity, our analysis pays particular attention to their practical reason – the intuitive sense-making that guides their actions, decisions, and readings of situations, in being good professional women. We find that this practical reason is filtered through two main cultural scripts that inform their lives' work. These are "the patriarchal gender contract," adapted to class and educational sub-group, which informs the full gamut of their work lives, and "the Jewish domination script" that presides over their career environments. These scripts are at once cultural and historical. As all cultural scripts, they provide a subconscious compass for actors' decisions, interpretations, and sense making. At the same time, the political economic embedment of these scripts in PCI national and civil subordination, and in the gender regime that entangles together Arab and Israeli patriarchies, attaches the women's compass to historical power structures. Their stories reveal ongoing navigations of contradictory expectations and measurements of gendered propriety, of tensions between success and vulnerability and between individuality and collective belonging, and a deep awareness that their largely-friendly work environments may readily turn hostile in times of political tensions. In tracing this navigation, we depict a delicate process of professional feminine subject making that is culturally and historically specific.

Beyond women's personal stories, the materials we present provide a glance into the life texture of PCI more broadly. Emphatically, this study does not include direct interviews with men/spouses, employers, or colleagues. Nevertheless, we believe that it makes an important contribution to the cumulative understanding of middle-class lifestyles among PCI more generally. More specifically, it sheds light on the intersectional repercussions, for highly-educated Palestinian women, of the Israeli neoliberal bargain that offers PCI economic citizenship, namely enhancing their economic integration in return for their coming to terms with their exclusion from the core Jewish-Zionist polity. The closing chapter of the book addresses some of these repercussions, drawing on Amalia Sa'ar's long-standing research on the implications of the Israeli policies in the new millennium. For twenty-odd years, successive right-wing governments featured seemingly-contradictory policies towards PCI. On the one hand, they have proactively promoted their economic integration, channeling designated funds and offering diversity programs of sorts as part of an aggressive market-led development model. On the other hand, they have unapologetically escalated their legal and symbolic exclusion, through a blitz of racist legislation that was accompanied by blatantly racist discourse, and by conveniently allowing criminal violence to wreck their communities. In a series of publications, Sa'ar (2016, 2017, 2023) interprets this policy as the latest version of Israel's continuous attempt to "square the circle" of a Jewish-democratic state, this time by reducing the liberal democratic component of Palestinian citizenship to the right to economic participation – offering them a economic citizenship – while further entrenching the state's Jewish character.

The case study of professional women provides a nuanced peek into the benefits and impasses that the economic citizenship bargain carries for Palestinians located in the particular intersection of middle-class, female gender, and academic education; and, of course, to the deeper ironies that accompany late-capitalist transpositions of the idea of citizenship from the realm of the state to the realm of the market in the context of racialized systemic inequalities. Concomitantly, by bringing the political-economic context to bear on the women's personal processes of subjectivation, this case also deepens our understanding of such processes' historical embedment.

Chapters outline:

Part I. – Women Forging Ahead amid Multiple Obstacles

Chapter 1. Introduction

Part II. – Women’s Career Chances at the Intersection of Gender and Nationality

Chapter 2. Analytical framework

Chapter 3. Women's career chances and the ethno-national script

Chapter 4. Women's career chances and the gender script

Part III – The Limited Bargain of Economic Citizenship

Chapter 5. Discussion

**Chapter 1**. opens with brief profiles of three professional women – a medical doctor, a lawyer, and a high-tech engineer. We then present a short literature review of the following topics: a general overview of the challenges facing minority career women, and the growing scholarly preoccupation with middle-class lifestyles, subjectivity, consumerism, and leisure among women in the MENA region. Next, we draw, in broad strokes, the background against which PCI professional women operate: we describe the infrastructure and living conditions in the Palestinian communities, their longstanding state neglect and discrimination, and the more recent introduction of a market-led development model, including corporate diversity programs, that has characterized Israel's neoliberal turn. This is followed by some statistics regarding higher education that indicate a consistent growth in PCI university enrollments, and a particularly dramatic leap in the numbers of Palestinian *female* students and university graduates, including in competitive, high-profile professions. The chapter ends with a description of the study.

**Chapter 2**. presents the analytical framework. We explain how we use the concepts of structure and agency, gender, and culture, and dwell on the distinction between a cultural and a culturist analysis. We then turn to the two cultural scripts that prevail over PCI career women's experiences: the patriarchal gender contract, as adapted to middle-class heteronormative professional women, which informs the full range of their work experiences, and the script of Jewish domination, which predominates their career environments.

**Chapters 3 and 4** explore the practical implications of each script, respectively, for the women's careers opportunities and experiences. In these two chapters, which comprise the book's empirical core, we bring women's reported experiences, thoughts, and interpretations.

**Chapter 5** contains the book's discussion. This chapter aims to advance the theoretical implications of the findings, and of our initial analytical use of notion of cultural scripts. It begins with our reading of the recent contradictory Israeli policies towards PCI as offering them an economic bargain – the promise of better prospects of employability and capitalist gains, alongside further depletion of an already weak civic entitlement – then asking how do the women make practical sense of this bargain. And since practical reason is filtered through cultural scripts, this exploration allows us to trace the scripts' anchoring in political-economic conditions. Moreover, and in direct continuation to that, the discussion throws light on the question of how subjectivity and the cultural scripts underlying it are anchored in, and responding to dynamic political economic conditions.

**Readership**

This short book of approximately 50,000 words, is intended for academic and popular readers alike. It engages with contemporary scholarship in Middle East women's studies, minority career women, gender studies more generally, and of course Israel/Palestine, which makes it pertinent for teaching and research in a range of topics related to these fields. At the same time, it is not theoretically heavy. It uses very little professional jargon, and the empirical chapters are rich with personal stories, dilemmas, and opinions, which makes it accessible for popular audiences, who are interested in women in this region.

**Authors Information**

**Amaila Sa’ar**

I am an associate professor and chair of Anthropology at the University of Haifa. My main research topics include the intersections of gender, class and citizenship among the Palestinian citizens of Israel, vernacular security, corporate diversity, religion and cosmopolitanism, feminist and feminine subjectivities. My first book, *Economic Citizenship: Neoliberal Paradoxes of Empowerment (*Berghahn Books, 2016) is an ethnography of the Israeli social economy field and the institutional attempt to enhance low-income Jewish and Palestinian women’s economic participation. In 2021, Hawazin Younis and I published a Hebrew language book titled *Diversity: Palestinian career women in Israel* (Open University Press). This book was based on the initial research report that we wrote for the foundation that supported the study (the Ministry of Science and Technology), and accordingly included some practical conclusions regarding diversity employment. Although the book proposed here is based on this preliminary text, it is more analytically mature, and better theoretically informed. Leaving out pragmatic recommendations regarding neoliberal diversity, it focuses on three combined themes: professional women's subjectivity formation, the historical grounding of cultural scripts, and the predicaments related to the notion that citizenship may be reduced to economic participation, particularly in a hyper-nationalist, ethnocratic context.

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**Hawazin Younis**

I am a sociologist, currently a post-doctoral fellow at the Kraitman School of Advanced Studies at Ben-Gurion University. The proposed book is based on my doctoral research, which was done under Amalia Sa'ar's supervision. My dissertation focused on the challenges of minority career women, using intersectionality theory and sociology of work literature. While the present book draws on the same interviews, our analytical focus is more anthropological, in the double sense of exploring processes of subjectification and the operation of cultural scripts, of course put within a historical context.