

Female Palestinian Community Social Workers - Israeli Citizenship: Between The Personal and The Political

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Abstract: This research brings forth the voices of the female Palestinian community social workers - citizens of Israel – who are engaged in community social work, and presents it in their personal, social and political context.

In the current study, an attempt was made to describe the perception and experience of the Palestinian community social workers, as it emerges out of their experience in this field, and of being women belonging to a national minority within the state majority. Simultaneously, the study describes the challenges they face, the methods of coping with these challenges and tools that help them.

The study is a qualitative research that allows recording the perceptions and experiences of female Palestinian community social workers within the field of social work. In addition, the study presents the significance of community social work in their eyes, the challenges it raises in front of them and their ways of dealing with said challenges.

In order to collect the information, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for fifteen female Palestinian Arab community social workers, citizens of Israel, who possess a seniority of at least three years of community social work, and defined themselves as Palestinian women.

The findings show that the experience of the Palestinian community social worker in community work is a complex one. It refers to their personal space as a political one containing great complexity. To profoundly understand the experiences of these community social workers within the socio-political context, a question was raised covering the following issues: the choice of community social work; the meaning of being a Palestinian Arab woman in this field of work; professional, political and gender-related challenges; coping strategies and tools.

The findings indicate that in many cases, the choice of Palestinian women in Israel of the community social work profession was personal and political concurrently. The factors of this choice can be attributed to the personality characteristics, political ideology that motivates the Palestinian women to promote their community and their desire to intensify it. The findings reveal that community social workers see their work as a safe haven where they try to escape the complex reality in which they live. As Arab women who chose to dually define themselves as Palestine and to practice community social work, they are given a special opportunity and an important platform to make their voices heard and to work for a change in the status quo.

Within the findings, it is possible to specify three different challenges facing the female Palestinian community social workers: The first challenge breaks down to gender aspects related to the way Arab society perceives academic, leaders and community active women, who compete with the male establishment for the public sphere. A second aspect of gender perception is the way Arab society perceives the profession of community social work and its significance. A third aspect of the gender concept is the way in which the state and the establishment perceive Palestinian women who are engaged in this field. The second challenge relates to the professional-political loyalty of Palestinian community social workers to the establishment on the one hand, and on the other hand, relates to the community's fear and lack of trust as well as to the ambivalent relationship that exists between community social work in Arab society and the establishment. The third professional challenge relates to discrepancy between the theory taught in Israeli academia and the community social work practice in Arab society.

Among the other findings, this study describes the difference between the different coping strategies of the participants; three main strategies were found: The first is selecting a negotiating position with the social and institutional patriarchy. The second is the Marginality as a site of resistance whose costs is known in advance. And the third is the use of

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identity-hybrid masks. Other important findings are the two tools that assist Palestinian community social workers in dealing with the various challenges. Firstly, strengthening of the critical consciousness and secondly, building their cooperation with community members and with colleagues.

Keywords— Community Work, Coping Strategies, Female Palestinian Community Workers, Palestinian Women, Political Context.