

Arab Israelis | ‘There is a place for everyone in this feminist struggle for life’: an interview with Samah Salaime

Samah Salaime speaking after receiving the 2015 New Israel Fund UK Human Rights Award. Screenshot. Youtube.

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Samah Salaime is the founder of Na’am/Arab Women in the Center. A social worker, she lives and works with her family in the Jewish-Arab community of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam and is a regular writer on Local Call, +972 Magazine and Ha’aretz. A Palestinian Israeli, hers is one of the most powerful and articulate voices raised against violence against Arab women in Israel and for gender equality. She spoke to Fathom Editor Alan Johnson on 23 January 2018.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

Alan Johnson: *Can we begin with your personal journey? What led you to a life of commitment to social justice and, in particular, to the struggle against violence against women?*

Samah Salaime: I guess there have been two defining battles in my life, both egalitarian: the creation of a shared society between Palestinians and Jews, and the achievement of gender equality. I was born in northern Israel and my extended family members are all Palestinian refugees since 1948, mostly living in Syria. I grew up knowing what it means to be female in a patriarchal society, to be a member of a minority, and not to feel a sense of belonging to the society you have been born into.

As a teenager I developed a greater understanding of what it meant to be a Palestinian in a Jewish state. Aged 19, I landed in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University. My Hebrew was broken and caused me a lot of embarrassment. No one in my small village had prepared me to be a young Palestinian woman in a big city with a large Jewish population. I had learned about Jewish culture but I hadn’t had any physical encounters with Jewish people.

I had decided to study for a degree in social work as I was determined to serve my community and work for social justice. We believed that a Palestinian state would arrive soon. With other young women in Jerusalem in 1996 we dared to dream of establishing Palestinian welfare services in East Jerusalem. A year later I helped establish the women’s social work team there. But everything collapsed after three years and I found myself working in a mixed Jewish-Arab city called Lod, serving Arab women in Israel’s periphery.

In 2000 my partner and I moved from Jerusalem to Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom to provide a better future for our children (he worked at the school for peace in the village). I was fascinated by the idea that Arab and Jewish families could choose to live together at Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, and we

have been satisfied here for the last 17 years.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

An Absent State

AJ: *Let's discuss the fight for gender equality. As I read your writings on violence against women in Israel, particularly those about the situation faced by many women in Arab towns and cities, there are huge problems with both Israeli state practice and patriarchal Arab society. To take the state first, it is now widely accepted – former defence minister Moshe Arens has written about this, for example – that the state has been failing in its duty to properly police Arab areas and to protect Arab citizens, particularly Arab women. Why is this?*

Samah: The Israeli state certainly has a share of responsibility. Twenty per cent of Israeli citizens are Palestinian/Arab but 50 per cent of gender-based violence is directed toward Palestinian/Arab women. We work, pay taxes and deserve to be treated as equal citizens. But in terms of gender equality, we are not. In terms of violence, we know that more than 200,000 Jewish and Arab-Palestinian women in Israel were beaten or abused in 2017 and we know that at least 20 women are killed every year. But the services provided by the state for Arab women's health, welfare, education, and so on, are not equal to those provided to their Jewish neighbours.

Yes, Arab women have made strides forward in Israel. The birth rate has been reduced from 6.1 to 3.1 children. And Arab women have certainly become more educated, although 35 per cent of graduate Arab women are unemployed. They get a degree but the Israeli labour market is not set up to absorb them.

I tracked each case of femicide of Arab and Jewish women in Israel and found that 80 per cent of the crimes against Arab women (the police had denied that number for years) were not being properly investigated. Accusations never led to trial, perpetrators were not brought to justice. But in cases of crimes against Jewish women, the great majority of criminals will be pursued. And that is as it should be: perpetrators should be pursued by the authorities and punished within the law regardless of whether they are Arab or Jewish. 'Culture' should never be a reason for inaction.

When a woman is at high risk of violence, the welfare system should provide her with refuge. Yet in Israel there are only 14 shelters, two of which are for Arab women. There is only one shelter for teenage and young Arab women – one shelter for over one million residents, which is shameful. The needs of Arab women are being ignored. The system cannot hide behind the claim of 'cultural sensitivity'. For me, that's nonsense. Arab women go to the authorities asking for help, but without over-generalising; often the authorities could not care less if the violence is taking place inside the Arab family.

Terms like 'honour killing' are part of the problem. We know the thing does not even really exist. You find criminals paid to kill women who were in line to receive a good inheritance, women who wanted to get divorced, and so on – the kind of 'reasons' you find the world over for male violence against women. But in Israel too often the authorities themselves speak about 'honour' and the 'family honour' and so fail to investigate the violence with rigour. So Na'am/Arab Women in the Center has to fight against ideology, terminology and bureaucracy.

A Patriarchal Culture

AJ: *You've identified what you need from the Israeli state. But your articles also raise the alarm about a chronic breakdown in some Arab villages, towns and cities. You write about the toxic mix of*

poverty, guns, crime, sexism, and a stalled modernisation process that have produced a terrible violence against Arab women. What changes are needed in Arab/ Palestinian society?

Samah: Many! I work in so called 'mixed cities' where Palestinians are the minority. The rate of crime there tends to be 10 times higher than the national average. Forty per cent of all crimes, not only gender crimes, happen in this part of Israel, where the illegal guns and drugs industries are blooming. They are like greenhouses for crime.

In these places women tend to be less educated, poorer and more vulnerable. These women are more likely to be victims of violence and abuse than educated middle-class women. There is a relationship between being a less-educated woman living in poverty in the centre of Israel, or as a Bedouin in the south of Israel, and being subject to misogyny, violence, forced or early marriage, and so on. These phenomena are illegal in Israel but nobody enforces the law.

My feeling is that many Israelis don't really care. The state does not give civil society organisations the support and resources to fight these ills. Often, it does not even give us the permission to get involved. My expectation of any police officer or policy-maker, any Mayor or minister, is that they listen to women on the ground and design a policy response according to their needs. It is Arab women themselves who know what is needed. Instead, you get programmes copied from the UK or the US or from a Jewish city like Tel Aviv. They apply the programme to an Arab village and are then surprised when it doesn't work. There is a better way: policy and practice should emerge from the state's close engagement with Arab woman. Yes, this needs to be done carefully, because sometimes the Arab communities are wary of cooperating with the Israeli authorities for fear of being accused of being 'traitors'. Yes, it's complicated. But the effort must be made or the Arab woman ends up trapped between her family, her community and the state.

My belief is that as a society we must have a red line: women's safety. When a battered or abused woman goes to the police and asks for help, her safety is more important than what are often majority misconceptions about minority 'culture'. If an Arab woman decides to leave the family home, for example, then a Jewish police officer should not take her back, and that has happened (he thinks he knows what is better for her). The same officer, faced with a Jewish woman in the same situation, somehow knows that the law - and plain decency - does not allow him to return the woman to the home. We need to smash all these stereotypes of 'the Arab woman' and all these false assumptions about 'their culture'. When women are fighting for their freedom from violence, women need the authorities with them all the way. I now write articles in Hebrew because I was amazed that so many Jewish women don't really know what's happening to their neighbours. This is now part of my activism.

The good news is that a lot of officials at the Education Ministry and the Welfare Ministry have begun to understand this. We have started to speak in Hebrew, brief people in the Knesset, issue position papers setting out what the fundamental problems of Arab women are and what women need from the state. And by engaging in advocacy for the Arab woman internationally, we have ensured that the OECD, the EU and the UN now ask the Israeli government lots of embarrassing questions about Arab women in Israel. (We provide those bodies with all the statistics!)

A New Arab Man?

AJ: *You have pointed to the absolutely devastating impact on Arab women's lives of deeply reactionary attitudes among many Arab men. You wrote that the Arab man all too often 'wants control over a woman and allows himself to attack her when she challenges his control.' You went on: 'What's different is that the Jewish man wants control over his partner, whereas the Arab man extends that [desire for] control to his sister, his niece, even his mother. It's gender murder'. These*

are tough words. How widespread are those kinds of attitudes and practices? Do you detect any signs of a change in men's attitudes? I noticed the term 'new Arab man' appeared in the piece you wrote recently for the +972 website.

Samah: Arab men are in big trouble! First, from their point of view, they are men who love their land and value their status but can feel disempowered within Israeli society. So it is inside Arab society that those men may seek to reassert control, not just in the private sphere but also in the public sphere, especially in local politics. Second, there is an economic aspect to this question. The Arab woman is more likely to work today, but as they cannot go into industry like men, they often study, become educated and many are becoming economic providers. As a result many seek the kind of freedom that so often accompanies rising economic status. Being no longer the sole economic support of the family, no longer the 'ATM' of the family, some Arab men, take this change very hard. In their mindset, they have to be in control of their women. If this man doesn't have the tools to deal with challenge to traditional notions of role, identity and status he may become violent, relying on physical force to reassert control. Some Arab women are paying a high price for their freedom.

But yes, there are signs of a new generation emerging, the generation of my son, which understands more and more the new power balance and is willing to adapt to it. Some are becoming more and more 'feminist,' so to speak. Some have even started to fight for gender equality. For example, we have been demonstrating against femicide and gender crime for 15 years, and at the beginning only women participated in the demos. However, at our most recent demonstration thousands of men, including religious men, took part. Yes, I have found that there is a New Arab Man emerging. He wants something different: to be modern, to have fewer children, to have a modern life, to live that life peacefully, and to have a relationship of equality with his life partner and not one of control.

There is change also within Islam. The classic and reasonable Islam that I believe in not only allows women to be part of the economic system, the Church system and the political system; it encourages them. The wife of Muhammad was a businesswoman, after all. He was her worker. I learned Islam, I know my religion and I am fighting from the inside, which is a lot harder than fighting as a secular individual. But it has results. For example, I've had this ongoing argument with the Islamic Party (Ra'an) in the Knesset. I asked: where are the women? Hadash, the Communist Party, has a woman MK. Balad has women MKs. But not the Islamic Party. Well, just last week the Islamic Party approved a motion that instructs the party to include women on their list. Yes, this has taken 60 years of struggle! But it is progress and more progress than Shas or United Torah Judaism, the Jewish ultra-Orthodox parties, have made.

Of course, there is a long way to go. For example, I contributed to a story in Haaretz about problems faced by some Arab women in Israeli universities. Being alone, far from their families, some Arab men try to threaten them or enforce a relationship. These men may try to use social media against them. We found that approximately 50 per cent of the Arab women inside Israeli universities have experienced these kind of problems. So yes, some Arab men, even those at university, refuse to be modern. They need to change their mind-set. It's a really hard thing for them to do, but it must happen.

AN EMERGING ARAB FEMINIST REVOLUTION?

AJ: *You wrote recently for +972 about your hopes for an Arab feminist revolution, stressing the liberating role that Facebook is having in many women's lives. What's going on?*

Samah: One of the ways Arab women are controlled by men is by the restriction of their freedom of movement and association, so limiting their connectedness and their knowledge and everything that flows from both those things. Social media can open a virtual door for Arab women and it can be

very empowering, especially for younger women. Women can come to know what is happening in the Arab world. For example, we can know what is happening today in Tunis – major reforms to laws and practices that have long ruled women's lives. The more you know the harder it is for others to oppress you. Women no longer need their husband to fill out applications for visas or to buy something from Amazon. Arab women have discovered this treasure and are like kids in a candy store. There are unlimited possibilities. On Facebook groups, there are thousands of women sharing their stories, sometimes sad stories, but also success stories. Suddenly, we feel like we aren't alone. It's a movement, but for now a hidden movement.

That's why lots of Arab men don't like Facebook. They're jealous! My parents are both retired teachers. My mother volunteered to teach the community in her village and later she became a Facebook activist. I wrote about what she did on Facebook and lots of other women around the villages then got in touch and wanted her to teach them. She now has thousands of followers and so many connections. My father sometimes feels he is losing her to this virtual world. Through the internet she has reconnected with family in Holland. I booked a flight for her and my sister who went with her to help with English. My father is astonished by her ability to connect and to discover the world and he feels like he is left behind. She is 65, so you can imagine what a 15-year-old girl can do with Facebook and Twitter. This is a new world.

RESISTANCE - NA'AM/ARAB WOMEN IN THE CENTER

AJ: *Could you tell us about the work of your organisation, Na'am/Arab Women in the Center?*

Samah: Arab Women in the Center (AWC) is a small feminist organisation based in the centre of Israel in Lod, next to the airport. We are open to all: we want Arabs, Jews, men and women to be a part of this struggle. That's why I called my organisation 'Na'am'. Na'am means 'yes' in Arabic, and expresses our view that there is a place for everyone in this feminist struggle for life.

We focus on improving Arab women's status and opportunity. So we fight on issues like polygamy, we push for the representation of the women in local politics, in municipalities and city councils, and we operate a Women's Rights Centre twice a week. We have maybe 40 volunteers, both Arab and Jewish. Hundreds of women come to us each month to tell us their stories and ask for our help. Sometimes they need financial help, sometimes help in navigating the welfare bureaucracy and of course we deal with a lot of cases of domestic violence. We have a program for the young women leaders and we are really proud that the first generation of Na'am leaders are graduating now.

We also conduct national and international advocacy work about gender crime. We have a forum of international stakeholders. We run projects for the social and economic empowerment of 'illegal' (undocumented) women.

We help Palestinian women who are married to Israeli men. According to Israeli law, they are illegal and they cannot be united with their families. They cannot have [Israeli] nationality or citizenship. So they stay illegally in Israel and cannot access health insurance and social insurance. In some places they cannot drive. We have about 35,000 women with this status. It's only an issue with Arab families. A Jewish man can marry a German woman and she would be a citizen in one year. If a Palestinian Arab man marries a German woman, it is impossible to gain nationality.

For these Palestinian women we started an economic project making Palestinian food, Palestinian embroidery and handicrafts; the creative things that women do. We call the project Threads of Change. Jewish women buy these things to help these Palestinian women have a decent life. About 50 women work in this project.

And we also organise demonstrations when we have to. Yaer Ravivo (former Mayor of Lod) said some horrible things a few years ago – if Arab men must kill their wives, they are invited to do so, in their own neighbourhood, to paraphrase. So we demonstrated against him and he apologised for his awful statement. He said 'Na'am is a very small organisation with a very big mouth'. That is Na'am! We demand women are treated as equals and will not give up that dream. And we will win. We are only more and more alive and we have friends and partners all over the world.

Samah Salaime

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