

UNPACKING THE POLITICS OF EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: THE CASE OF ISRAELI JEWISH AND PALESTINIAN WOMEN IN MUNICIPAL COUNCILS¹

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Abstract: *This research aims to unpack the politics of gender equality and inclusion in municipal councils, focusing on the patterns of women's political practices; the institutional impact of the national and local cultures on the organizational cultures. It is based on action-research and mixed-method format. Eight municipal councils in small and medium size Jewish, Arab and Jewish-Arab towns in the Northern district participate in the study. Initial findings suggest that women's meaningful involvement in the municipal strategic decision-making is partial. There is a significant gap between the declared strive for gender equality and inclusion and women's actual influence in decision-making. This gap looms particularly large in the Arab towns. The mechanisms of exclusion and potential avenues of counteracting them are discussed.*

Key-words: *politics, equality, inclusion, diversity, gendering in organizations, local government*

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1. Introduction

Confronting the challenges of contemporary societies marked by diversity and social divisions requires representation of all sectors of society. Full-fledged involvement of the highest ranks of leadership in strategic decision-making deems crucial. Participation of women at top echelons can benefit the society at large, especially by sustaining the democratic processes (Moghadam 2010). Moreover, recent research on women in upper echelon positions, indicates that diversity of decision-makers improves the chances of women's promotion to top leadership and fosters female leaders' tenure at the top (Glass and Cook 2016). Yet, actual women's participation in strategic decision-making bodies confronts significant barriers.

This research systematically explores the burning issue of women's limited participation and involvement in upper echelon decision-making forums in Israel, focusing on the municipal government.

1.1. The politics of gender diversity in TMTs

What are the real-life implications of gender diversity? Does it promote gender equality and women's meaningful inclusion in strategic decision-making? What are the overt and implicit political processes of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) underlying women's participation in top management forums?

The Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) tackles women's inclusion in top management yearly. The last report (2018) points to some progress in women's involvement at upper echelon forums, yet the advancement is slow. Research on the cross-roads of gender, leadership and management suggests that progress in women's entry and involvement at upper echelons encounters significant barriers (Debusscher 2016). Social construction of women's status constitutes an important component of the mechanism implicitly excluding women from meaningful participation in strategic top teams. Their inferior gendered social status exacerbates the persistence of the glass-ceiling (Calas, Smirchich, and Halvino 2014). Extant research substantiates this argument showing that TMTs are not gender neutral, however, its manifestations are largely hidden (Casey, Skibnes, and Pringle 2011; Glass and Cook 2016). Consequently, male elites endure with women hitherto playing their *token* roles (Cook, Ingersoll, and Glass 2019; Desivilya Syna, Palgi and Sabbah Karkaby 2018; Desivilya Syna and Costea 2015; Desivilya and Palgi 2014; Lewis and Simpson 2012).

Research on the nature of women's actual participation in TMTs is scarce. Much attention was given to their numerical representation but less to their substantive participation, their social capital and power relations within

these TMTs. Knowledge gaps pertain to the processes in such groups: the roles actually played by women in these forums. Hence, a thorough explication of women's 'place' in TMTs discerning phenomena such as construction of power relations, gender stereotyping in decision-making processes and networking patterns is deemed important (Cook et al. 2019).

Extant research suggests that women still perform mainly communal functions: facilitating TMTs development, encouraging open debate, enhancing monitoring mechanisms, but have limited impact on actual decisions (Charles 2014; Desivilya Syna et al. 2018; Kossek, Su, and Wu 2016). The perception that women are still unequal partners and the inherent tensions ingrained in gender role expectations with respect to leadership curtail women's influence in TMTs. On the one hand, they are expected to display feminine communal management patterns; on the other hand, their inclusion at the top requires manifestation of the masculine, agentic characteristics ascribed to successful management. Women leaders who are able to engage this paradox of the dual demands are more likely to gain full-fledged entry and involvement in strategic decision-making (Zheng, Kark and Meister 2018).

1.2. Unpacking EDI politics at the local government

Holman's (2017) research on women's representation in the US local governments, indicated that institutional, demographic and local politics factors shape women's participation in top echelons. Thus, women are more likely to be elected in district-related positions than to the mayor's office or city councils, in cities where women had higher incomes and education levels and locations where they could gain local support of the parties. The study also suggested that women differ in the policies they favor and exhibit different practices in policy building. Women tend to concentrate on policy issues related to diversity and equality promotion and tend to work collaboratively with their constituents while enhancing inclusion of multiple stakeholders.

In a similar vein, Charles' (2014) research studying a newly formed devolved institution – the National Assembly of Wales - pointed at marked differences between women's political practices at the devolved new institution and the local councils. The national council of Wales was grounded in the institutional commitment to equality, striving to and actually attaining equal gender representation. By contrast, the local councils maintained the masculine cultures, underscoring the normative gender-role expectations at political decision-making forums and sustained women's underrepresentation. The contextual influences and actual representation

rates were reflected in different interaction patterns in the top decision-making forums: women who formed a “critical mass” at the devolved institution were able to challenge organizational gendering and evince consensual, cooperative political practices; interestingly these patterns were also observed among men. By contrast, the local councils demonstrated strong gendering effects: women and men exhibiting the normatively prescribed behaviors that is, dominance of the masculine, competitive, aggressive stance.

Drawing on Charles' (2014) study, the municipal councils at the Israeli scene highly resemble the local councils in the UK, both in terms of the contextual institutional influences and gender representation rates. Initial evidence in Israel shows that women's participation in local government had insignificant effect on budget allocation even in seemingly “feminine” domains such as education and welfare (Steklov and Reingewertz 2015).

Another study conducted on Israeli women incumbents in the political sphere, showed that they were largely excluded from the prevailing male communication networks. Interestingly, in the rare cases when they were invited into men's networks, women preferred to form their own networks, which allowed in their view a different discourse (Akirev and Ben Horin Naot 2015).

Gendering effects loom even stronger in the Arab society in Israel, due to continuing patriarchal characteristics. The latter pertains to social construction accentuating men's dominance and women's inferiority who are required to abide by stringent social norms. These salient power gaps constitute a significant barrier on Arab women's participation in the political sphere. Women's presence at the political arena is viewed as a severe violation of social norms, interpreted as assimilation in the Western society accompanied by a loss of authentic Arab identity (Barraagan, Erogul, and Essers 2018; Hanif 2016).

Tight patriarchal cultures proliferated by the Israeli institutions and strong conservative emphasis in the local communities impede the possibility of challenging organizational gendering in the municipal councils. This trend is prominent in the municipal councils of the Arab towns, where gendering intersects with patriarchal culture, compounding the influence of the central social institutions and coloring the organizational culture, political representation and practices in the local government (Arar and Abu-Rabia-Queder 2011; Barraagan et al. 2018; Charles 2014; Hanif 2016; Knights and Omanović 2016; Lee and Kramer 2016).

Notwithstanding gendering effects, some evidence from the Jewish and Arab- societies points at changes toward greater involvement of women in

the political sphere including the local government. Until 2013, Israel was among the lowest ranking countries in women's representation in the local government. The 2013 elections marked a turning point in women's involvement at both the national and local political forums. Akirev's and Ben-Horin Naot's (2015) data point at concerted efforts designed to foster women's entry into the political sphere. The activities, led mainly by NGOs, created the necessary infrastructure that enabled women's work in the political arena, especially promoting legislation aimed at increasing their authority in municipal councils. Thus, in 2014 an amendment was introduced to the local government law, which aimed at increasing the rates of women's representation through financial incentives of higher party funding for moving up women candidates to realistic positions (Mizrachi-Simon 2016).

Another empowering mechanism for boosting women's involvement in political leadership was fostering gender awareness and narratives at the public agenda and enhancing women's professional competence in the political sphere. This was accomplished through regional meetings, seminars and specialized training, consequently also creating a support network for consultation and common activities (Akirev and Naot Ben Horin 2015).

Extant findings demonstrate the important role of organizations' commitment to gender mainstreaming into the political realm and its translation to deeds in boosting women's political involvement. Thus, local and national campaigns advocating the importance of women's involvement in the political arena, not only open spaces for women's meaningful participation in the political discourse, but also seem to produce concrete results. They foster women's motivation and actual attempts to step into the local government and raise their actual representation rates in municipal councils (Akirev and Ben-Horin Naot 2015). Drawing on Bourdieu (Husu 2013), such actions contribute to shaping the specific political field where women operate vis-à-vis men through modified social capital and habitus (networking, attaining public credit, resistance to silencing and exclusion) that is deciphering the 'rules of the game'.

In sum, prior research suggests that changing the organizational culture and decision-making practices in TMTs requires multiple emphases. These include developing a cultural framework - mainstreaming gender into the main social institutions (especially into budget planning and distribution); underscoring commitment to gender equality; establishing a critical mass of women in TMTs; and further developing women's capabilities to engage the paradoxes embedded in gender role expectations at upper echelons. Beyond changing the "playing field" of TMTs, Cook et al. study (2018) underscores the crucial role of structural changes, particularly actual women's placement at

formal top leadership positions. Such official elite status allows women to extend their involvement afar their token roles, displaying strategic agency, exerting direct influence on decisions related to gender equality.

The current research attempts to unpack the politics of gender (in)equality, diversity and (ex)inclusion in municipal government. It examines how women actually reach formal leadership positions in the local government by following their career trajectories. We also focus on the dynamics at municipal councils, attempting to elucidate the mechanisms contributing to gender inequalities and ways curtailing women's exclusion - fostering their strategic influence.

The study aims to discern the **subtle and hidden aspects of gender construction** in the municipal government's decision-making bodies and power relations between women and men. Drawing on Kolb's and McGinn's (2009) construction of the term negotiation as an ongoing activity in organizations, we investigate how women engage in negotiating *authority* (their legitimacy), *value* (getting recognition and reward), *support* (developing networks) and *commitment* (impact on definition of "successful" council member). Specifically, this research endeavors:

- to unpack the politics of gender diversity, equality and inclusion in municipal councils,
- to illuminate the patterns of women's political practices,
- to elucidate institutional impact of national and local cultures on organizational cultures of gender EDI,
- to trace women's "success stories" and best practices within respective institutional environments and propose directions for policy makers based on the collected research evidence.

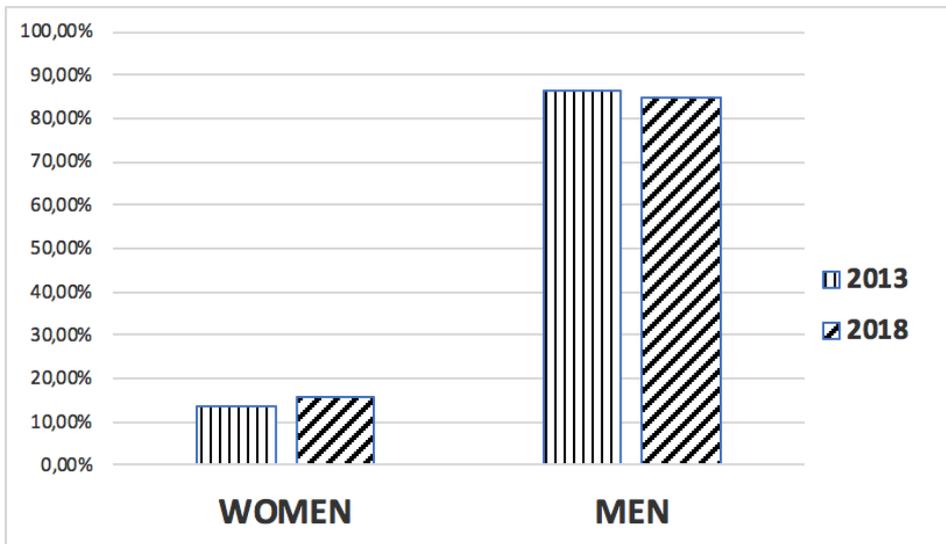
Thus, the current research will expand the knowledge base on women's involvement and participation practices in the local government in both the theoretical and practical realms. At the conceptual level, it will unravel the societal, cultural and organizational mechanisms of exclusion and the counteracting means potentially enhancing women's involvement and equal participation in top management of local governments. In the practical domain, the research will contribute policy-related insights intended at shaping national, regional and local policies, legal and organizational measures designed to promote women's full-fledged participation at upper echelons of local governments. This paper presents initial findings of the research in progress.

1.3. The Israeli Case

This section highlights the Israeli situation with regard to legislation designed to increase women's involvement in upper echelons of local governments and portrays the actual state-of-the-art with respect to women's participation in the top forums. The main component of the affirmative legislation constituted an amendment in the Israeli law as a motivating mechanism for local parties to include women candidates. Accordingly, a 15% budget increase was promised to the local parties having at least a third of women candidates for municipal elections. This amendment was implemented in the 2018 local elections. However, only 20% of the local parties reached that quota!!! Another measure designed to enhance women's influence in municipal councils was a legal mandate to appoint a woman advisor to the mayor on women's issues. In actuality, the contribution of the legislative mechanisms to women's representation in municipal councils appears rather limited as can be seen in Figures 1.

Figure 1 presents the percentage of women in Jewish and Arab municipal councils in the 2013 compared to the recent 2018 elections.

Figure 1: Women in the Israeli Municipal Councils - Jewish and Arab Municipalities



Source: Adjusted from Avgar (2019, 12)

The figure clearly shows that women's representation in the Arab municipal councils is barely visible (below 3%) although it has somewhat improved in the last elections. Women's representation in the Jewish situation is significantly higher in comparison to their Arab counterparts reaching 25% in the last elections, however still lagging behind men.

1.4. Research Questions

The main query underlying this study examines how women negotiate *authority* (their legitimacy), *value* (getting recognition and reward), *support* (developing networks) and *commitment* (impact on definition of "successful" council member). The specific sub-questions comprise the following:

- What are women's career trajectories to the top?
- How do women express their voices in strategic decision-making?
- What are the manifestations of gendering and exclusion in municipal councils?
- How do women attempt to circumvent the external and internal barriers to their full-fledged participation in municipal councils?

2. Methodology

In an attempt to respond to our research questions, we focus on women in the municipal councils in the Northern district of Israel. This decision rests on two reasons: a. Similarity of a geographic setting; b. The largest variety of Israeli towns in the Northern district.

The towns in our sample were selected from those that were rated in the DUN'S100 Annual 2016 (Dun & Bradstreet, Israel) according to five components: 1. Rate of surplus/deficit in the ordinary budget; 2. Property tax collection rate; 3. Ratio of grants to regular budget; 4. Ratio of businesses to residents; 5. Socioeconomic ranking.

Our sample is drawn from medium size (50,000-200,000 residents) and from small size (less than 50,000 residents) municipalities. We did not sample any big towns because no Israeli Arab or mixed town in the DUNS 100 is big. The sample includes Jewish, Arab and mixed municipal councils. This allows examining the processes within relatively homogenous versus more diversified councils.

Our methodology is based on action-research approach and on a mixed-method format. The study employs the following research tools: (1) a questionnaire survey administered to members of the municipal councils of the sampled towns; (2) official documents' analysis, observation and

documentation of municipal councils' periodical meetings; (3) in depth interview of two to three members from each municipal council and the mayors' advisers on women's issues and; (4) two think-tanks on issues of municipal policy that came up in the survey and the interviews. A separate think-tank will be organized for each type of the municipal councils: Arab and Jewish.

2.1. The Survey

A questionnaire was administered to all members of the municipal councils in the sampled towns. The questionnaire addresses several issues as follows. (1) Profile of the council member - demography (age, marital status, gender) education, occupation and public service experience; (2) Municipal issues that are important to them; (3) The features of the organizational climate at the municipal council; (4) Transparency of information; (5) Shared objectives; (6) Issues of contention; (7) Subjective evaluation of their council's performance.

2.2. Official Document Analysis and Observation of Municipal Councils' Meetings

We collected and analyzed reports from the municipal councils' meetings and from relevant governmental committees will be collected and analyzed. We also observed and documented 2-3 meetings of the municipal councils' periodical meetings. These meetings are open to the public. Moreover, a recent legislation mandates videotaping the proceeds of the council meetings.

2.3. The in-depth interviews

At the outset of the research process, preliminary interviews were conducted with either mayors, their deputies or CEOs in order to explain about the research, build rapport and facilitate further cooperation in the course of the research process.

The in-depth interviews with the council members constitute one of the main research tools. In each municipality two women council members will be interviewed and one men. In addition, the mayors' advisers on women's issues in the eight sampled towns will be interviewed. In those municipalities that have no women members two men will be interviewed. In the mixed municipalities at least one person from each sector will be interviewed. The interview questions are designed to capture and unravel the following issues: (1) Council members path for entering the municipal council - how they were located and how they were selected, what criteria and procedures were used; (2) Actual communication, conflict management and decision-making

patterns and the overall dynamics at the municipal councils; (3) Issues of interest for the participants which they raise at the council meetings and outside the meeting as well as issues they refrain from raising and the reasons underlying such actions; (4) Perceived transparency in information flow, differences in information, knowledge and expertise; (5) Perceived power asymmetries - differences in position or opinion among council members and perceived differences in control of valued social resources such as pay and status among members; (6) Perceptions with respect to the team climate (openness, cooperative orientation); (7) Opportunities versus challenges/barriers in exerting influence and the reasons underlying these perceptions; (8) Suggestions for changes in the management, procedures and activities at municipal councils and recommendations for policy changes.

2.4. The think-tank

The think tanks are designed to capture the implementation aspects of the proposed research and to emphasize the research/theory-practice interface. They will be based on the data collected from all the data sources and tools: documents, observations, the survey and the in-depth individual interviews as well as ideas which have been expressed in policy papers in different countries. The participants will include representatives of the Federation of Local Authorities as well as representatives from the Israeli municipal councils and women's organizations. The discussions in these forums will revolve around three core questions: WHY? (Vision and Strategic Plan) WHAT? (The issues to be engaged in the future policies promoting gender equality in local governments). HOW? (Action Plans).

3. Initial Findings

The findings presented in the following sections include both statistical data and qualitative data on women's representation and participation in the municipal councils. First, we provide findings with regard to the local governments nationwide, then, we concentrate on the sampled towns.

3.1 Women's representation rates

Research on the trajectories of leadership positions in local government shows that prior membership in municipal councils constitutes a major predictor of attaining the chair's post (The Institute of Democracy, 2018). Women's minority status in these forums constricts their odds to reach top leadership. Indeed, women attained the chair's post only in 5.4% of the local governments that participated in the recent elections.

The recent elections point at continuing upward trend in women's motivation to seek positions in municipal councils. Sixty-eight women submitted candidacy for municipal councils in 2018 in comparison to 42 in prior elections. The outcomes of the recent elections display a similar tendency: 426 women were elected to serve at municipal councils in comparison to 327 in 2013 elections. However, the growth rate in women's representation was merely 3%.

We now turn to women's representation rates in the eight sampled municipalities. No women mayors were elected in any of the sampled towns. No women or only one woman were appointed in two Arab towns, in one mixed town and one Jewish town. In the most 'egalitarian' Arab towns, three women were elected out of 19 council members. In the most 'egalitarian' Jewish town, six women serve as council members out of 17 council members.

In three of the Jewish municipalities there was an increase in the number of women (5-7; 3-5; 1-4) whereas in the other two the number of women decreased (2-1). In two of the three Arab municipalities there was also an increase in the number of women, in one it remained the same (2-3; 0-1; 1-1).

3.2. Gender Division in Decision-Making Forums

The data point at gendered office-holders allocation in all sampled municipalities. Specifically, men are in control of money matters (finance and budget distribution), serving as mayors, treasurers and heads of tender committees. By contrast, women are in charge of welfare and education issues: heads of welfare committees, education departments and legal advisers.

The next section presents initial findings on women's actual involvement in the investigated municipal councils, based on analyses of observations and protocols in the pre and post elections periods and preliminary interviews with mayors, deputies and CEOs of the municipal councils. The latter interviews were designed to establish rapport with the councils' management thereby allowing and facilitating our access as researchers into the research sites. We highlight several main themes that emerged from the content analyses of the research tools indicated above.

3.3. Declared Women's Inclusion

As can be seen in the following quotes, the mayors in Jewish as well as in Arab towns declare the importance of including women in the upper echelons of the municipalities; however, the implementation of these benevolent intentions falls short of actual materialization.

Jewish towns: (Mayor) *“women's empowerment figures prominently in the municipality. I promote it.”*

(Mayor): *“we have to appoint also women, we cannot have only men”* upon selecting a diseased woman for an award of distinguished resident, subsequently adding another (alive) woman.

Arab towns: *“the municipality supports women, but gender division is complex; if wish to have equality, need affirmative action...When special activities for women are proposed, the door is always open.”*

The findings collected thus far still leave the question as to the change in the temperature and climate for welcoming women at top decision-making forum wide open. Perhaps it is warming up for women's involvement in municipal councils, but as the subsequent themes demonstrate, women still need to surmount numerous barriers and negotiate their full-fledged participation. These negotiation tasks encompass three distinct arenas: negotiating legitimacy, negotiating influence and negotiating competence and commitment.

3.4. Negotiating Legitimacy

Women's presence in municipal councils is certainly not given rather needs to be negotiated, as exemplified by the following quote:

(Mayor): *“women's empowerment figures prominently in the municipality. I promote it.”* He also referred to women's municipal forum, allegedly established owing to his support: *“They couldn't determine who will represent them; they meet me each time in representative groups of 3-4.”* This statement shows the mayor's difficulty to accept a different mode of involvement, based on direct democracy.

In Arab towns, the task of negotiating legitimacy is even more pronounced as women need to cope with clan politics, engage and overcome the barriers of patriarchal culture, as demonstrated in the statements below:

“There are very dominant and charismatic women with us ...One of them worked very hard to muster support, but it turned out that her brother became a candidate, she was obliged to support him. [...] Restrictions on women while campaigning, such as visiting residents' homes.”

3.5. Negotiating Influence

Surmounting the barriers blocking women's visibility and actual influence in municipal councils requires women's active engagement, as demonstrated in the following exchange between the new mayor and a woman deputy:

S. (a woman deputy): *"I am raising the issue of women's underrepresentation in the committees. Only one woman was appointed as a committee chair."*

Mayor: *"Will give you with pleasure a committee. In all the committees I am present so are you and O. (another woman deputy). You know that I am in favor...You are welcome to make suggestions."*

The mayor's condescending expressions substantiate the need to negotiate influence in order to counteract the politics of inequality and exclusion.

Akin to negotiating legitimacy, in Arab towns, negotiating influence is more demanding than in Jewish towns due to the intersection of gendering with patriarchal culture. Such combined influence confines women's roles to the traditional gender division as manifested in the following statement made by a woman activist involved in the local politics:

"Adviser on Women's Issues is expected to organize ceremonies such as International Women's Day."

3.6. Negotiating Competence and Commitment

This theme was highly prominent in Arab towns where women's motivation, commitment and competence to participation and involvement in municipal councils were questioned, at best guarded with caution. The following statements made by two mayors substantiate this claim.

Mayor 1: *"I really wanted to have a woman in my party, but no women wished to be in this position. If I find a woman who wants to take part in the public sphere, will support her, but women are problematic"*

Mayor 2: *"Adviser on Women's Issues needs to have more stamina and passion than the current one has."*

Such adverse experiences of doubted competence and commitment were also reported by women themselves: *"The mentality of people in the Arab society is that it's difficult to count on a woman; she does not reveal enough self-assurance. They pursue men and not women."*

3.7. Politics of Exclusion (Silencing Attempts)

Women not only face the need to negotiate their legitimacy, influence, competence and commitment, they also need to resist and rebut both explicit and implicit attempts of exclusion and silencing. These efforts by their male counterparts at times verge on verbal aggression and even physical one. Such experiences were reported in both Jewish and Arab towns.

In one of the Jewish towns, a woman deputy relayed an experience from the initial phase of her political career: *"the fact that you are pretty does not*

mean we will do everything you ask for (mayor) [...] It's difficult to be a woman, there is a barrier."

Such silencing attempts made her succumb to male culture, reflected in behavior and code of dress.

In Arab towns, a variety of explicit and hidden tactics of exclusion and silencing were reported by both men as well as women. Some of the examples are presented below.

"One woman council member was attacked verbally and physically, had to protect her and her family." (Mayor)

"Abusive posts in social media, a need to cope with vulnerability and disrespect." (A woman activist in local politics)

"Attempts to exclude the adviser for women's issues - not inviting her to the council meetings; she then made attempts to obtain information and attended the meetings" (A woman activist in local politics).

Is the local government warming-up for women, especially at the upper echelons of decision-making? The results obtained hitherto cast doubts with regard to drastic climate change in the municipal councils. The upcoming section discusses both the query and the initial insights in more depth.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. Main Insights

This research aims to unpack the politics of gender (in)equality, diversity and (ex)inclusion in municipal government. It attempts to unravel the pathways of women to leadership positions in the local government. The study mainly captures the dynamics at municipal councils, elucidating the mechanisms contributing to gender inequalities and potential ways decreasing women's exclusion that is enhancing their strategic impact.

The current study discerns the **overt** as well as the **subtle and hidden aspects of gender construction** in the municipal government's decision-making bodies and power relations between women and men. We draw on Kolb's and McGinn's (2009) conceptualization of the construct negotiation as a continuous activity in organizations and examine how women negotiate *authority* (their legitimacy), *influence*, *commitment* and *competence* (definition of "successful" council member).

What can we tell about the intricate women's encounters with local politics based on our extant findings? Is the climate at the upper echelons of municipal councils warming up for women's involvement?

The initial findings suggest that women's meaningful involvement in the municipal strategic decision-making is partial at best. Notwithstanding a marked increase in women's motivation for involvement in local politics, candidacies for mayor and council's member positions and actual appointment for these posts in the last municipal election, there seems to be still a significant gap between the declared strive for gender equality, diversity and inclusion and women's actual influence in decision-making.

This gap looms particularly large in the Arab towns, however is also evident in the Jewish towns. Women still perform mostly the role of token women. In order to move beyond their token position, they need to negotiate legitimacy, influence, competence and commitment and resist the exclusion and silencing attempts by their male counterparts (Kolb and McGinn 2009; Lewis and Simpson 2012). Women still experience difficulty in challenging political correctness, tight patriarchal national, local and male oriented organizational cultures (Desivilya Syna et al. 2018).

In line with prior research, the impediments women face at municipal TMTs subsume structural, political, institutional and psychological mechanisms. Responding to these challenges requires simultaneous attention to each of the means of maintaining inequality, lack of diversity and exclusion (Cook et al. 2019; Desivilya et al. 2018; Lewis and Simpson 2012).

In order to counteract the still prevailing male-dominated politics in local governments and engender transition promoting women's inclusion and influence in the top management forums, implementation of multiple and simultaneous mechanisms deems important. These measures comprise developing a cultural framework - mainstreaming gender into the main social institutions (especially into budget planning and distribution); emphasizing commitment to gender equality; establishing a critical mass of women in TMTs; and further developing women's capacities to engage the paradoxes embedded in gender role expectations at upper echelons. Beyond changing the "playing field" of TMTs, Cook et al. study (2019) stresses the fundamental role of structural changes, particularly actual women's placement at formal top leadership positions. Such official elite status allows women to extend their involvement afar their token roles, displaying strategic agency, exerting direct influence on decisions related to gender equality.

4.2. Next steps

This research in progress will continue to unpack the politics of gender EDI in municipal councils, focusing on the patterns of women's political practices. We aim to elucidate the institutional impact of the national and local cultures on the organizational cultures of municipal councils and in turn on women's

patterns of influence and on gender mainstreaming in the municipal policy-making. We also endeavor to trace women's "success stories", "best practices" and actual "game changers" within the respective institutional environments.

Eventually, our action research can significantly contribute to materializing Julia Kristeva's expectation with regard to women's achievements in 21st century, as cited below.

"The sexual, social, and political liberation of women and their entry into various intellectual and professional domains in the modern polity raises the question of their equality or their difference with regard to men. This was the central question of the twentieth century. However, the third millennium will be the millennium of individual opportunities, or it will not be [...]. I've tried to go beyond the well-worn approach to these questions, which sought to define fixed sexual identities. [...] Therein lies genius, which is quite simply creativity.

So, is there a feminine genius?

The example of twentieth-century women has made it difficult to avoid the question. And it has led us to consider that the anxiety over the feminine has been the communal experience that has allowed our civilization to reveal, in a new way, the incommensurability of the individual. This incommensurability is rooted in sexual experience but nonetheless is realized through the risks that each of us is prepared to take by calling into question thought, language, one's own age, and any identity that resides in them. You are a genius to the extent that you are able to challenge the sociohistorical conditions of your identity. This is the legacy of Arendt, Klein, and Colette." (Kristeva 2004, 503-504)

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