

# Poverty in Arab-Palestinian society in Israel: Social work perspectives before and during COVID-19

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## Abstract

Arab-Palestinian families have one of the highest poverty rates in Israel. However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding this population from a social work perspective. This article presents an analysis of 64 supervision sessions held with Arab-Palestinian social workers with the aim of identifying context-specific knowledge on the barriers service users face in their daily lives. Our findings point to three types of barriers: economic, sociopolitical, and cultural/political. The article relates to the intersections of these barriers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Keywords

Arab-Palestinian, intersectionality, Israel, poverty-aware social work, social work practice, supervision

Although poverty is a widespread phenomenon that can harm anyone, in reality it is concentrated in marginalized groups and intersects with other social categories such as ethnicity, gender, and race. In Israel, the Arab-Palestinian community is the segment of society most vulnerable to poverty (Gal, 2017). Arab-Palestinians comprise approximately 21 percent of the Israeli population, with 45.3 percent of families and 57.8 percent of children living below the poverty line (Endeweld et al., 2019). Although studies have examined quantitative parameters of poverty in Arab-Palestinian society from economic, sociological, and political science perspectives, there is lack in research that takes a social work perspective. For example, there is no research on the unique obstacles faced by Arab-Palestinian service users and social workers or on the characteristics of social work practice within this community.

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This study aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the barriers faced by impoverished Arab-Palestinian families from the perspective of Arab-Palestinian social workers. We use the theoretical concept of *intersectionality* to examine the ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural, religious, and gender contexts that shape the lives of Arab-Palestinian families who struggle with poverty. We do so by analyzing the ways in which structural arrangements inhibit and disadvantage certain social groups based on their overlapping gender, ethnicity, and class identities, which are mutually constituted (Crenshaw, 1989; Krumer-Nevo and Komem, 2015).

Although the article addresses one segment of Israeli society, it has the potential to contribute to social workers around the world who deal with marginalized and impoverished communities. Moreover, the article aims to contribute to the developing body of knowledge on the implementation of the Poverty-Aware Social Work Paradigm (PAP). The PAP is currently the leading model of social work practice used by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services via the local social service departments (SSDs) with families living in poverty in Israel on a national scale. Its implementation in the Arab-Palestinian SSDs requires specific adaptations.

The article begins with a review of the historical and political context of Arab-Palestinian society and a brief overview of the Israeli context of poverty and social work. Next, it describes the study's methodology and its findings, which consist of three types of barriers: economic, sociopolitical, and cultural/political barriers. Finally, we discuss the intersection of these barriers.

## Historical and political context

Ninety percent of the Arab-Palestinians in Israel reside in small, peripheral towns and villages and belong to the three lowest socioeconomic scale clusters (Endeweld et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2012). Eighty-five percent of them are Muslims (16% Bedouin), 7 percent are Christian, and 8 percent are Druze (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Their poverty should be understood in the historical and political context of the Israeli society. Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Arab-Palestinians have been Israeli citizens and have been formally entitled to the full range of citizenship rights. Nonetheless, they constitute a minority whose status has been shaped under circumstances of war, destruction, and evacuation. Moreover, since they are perceived by Jewish society in general as part of the menacing Arab world, the shadow of disloyalty to the state hangs over their heads (Smooha, 2017). Thus, they constitute a separate ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural national minority that maintains separate communities and institutions.

This separation is manifested, for example, in the Arab-Palestinian economy, which exists alongside the advanced Jewish economy. The nationalization of the lands that were used for traditional agriculture prior to the establishment of the State of Israel (Jabareen, 2010) had major consequences in terms of both employment opportunities and housing. Farmers had to find lower wage employment, usually in jobs that involved manual labor (Fattal, 2013; Khattab, 2009; Khattab and Miaari, 2013; Levy, 2014). In the realm of housing, a lack of lands, appropriate housing policy, and investment in infrastructure and public services led to illegal construction and crowding (Bana, 2011).

In addition, there are significant gaps between Arab-Palestinian society and Jewish society in the field of education (Hendin et al., 2016). Although recently there have been improvements in this realm among members of the young generation (Fuchs, 2017), even when an increase in the number of Arab academics has been achieved, it has not been significantly reflected in the employment field due to discrimination and a lack of employment opportunities (Jabareen, 2010; Khattab, 2009).

Adding gender into the picture makes it even more complicated. The participation rate of Arab-Palestinian women in the workforce – 38.9 percent compared with 82.1 percent among Jewish Israelis (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018) – is among the lowest in the world and lower than the

average in the Arab world (Jabareen, 2010). Scholars are divided between those who emphasize lack of social and family support as the main explanation for this phenomenon (Abu-Baker, 2002), and those who emphasize lack of appropriate employment infrastructures due to political and economic factors (Khattab, 2009; Khattab et al., 2014; Yonay and Kraus, 2009).

## Poverty from a social work perspective: The Israeli context

Personal psychosocial services are provided in Israel through the local SSDs, which are the main providers of counseling, mediation, and advocacy to families who struggle with poverty and the problems related to it. Shaped by neoliberal ideology and managerialism, the organizational context of the SSDs is characterized by large caseloads (about 120 families per one full-time social worker on average), inadequate budgets, and limited opportunities for professional supervision (Gal, 2017; Lavee and Strier, 2018). The SSDs in the Arab-Palestinian localities also suffer from the weakness of these localities and their limited resources.

However, in 2015, the Israeli Ministry of Welfare and Social Services decided to focus on families in poverty and has since implemented special programs in the SSDs that operate according to the new PAP, which emphasizes relationship- and rights-based practice (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2020). The largest of these programs, *Families First* (Noshmim Lirvakha) and *Rights Centers* (Otzma), treat more than 10,000 families in 103 municipalities throughout Israel, 56 of which are Arab-Palestinian municipalities (of a total of 85 Arab-Palestinian municipalities in Israel). *Families First* provides intensive holistic treatment to families for 2 years. The *Rights Centers* run community-based programs, engage in group and community-activist work, and are involved in policy practice (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2019).

The implementation of these programs in the Arab-Palestinian localities exposed the dearth of knowledge regarding the specific challenges of poverty in these communities from a social work perspective. Taking this issue as a challenge, this study aimed to answer two questions. First, what kinds of barriers to economic empowerment and full participation in society do service users face, according to the social workers' perspective? Second, how are the different kinds of barriers related to one another?

## Method

To capture the perspectives of social workers as closely as possible to their lived professional experience, we analyzed 64 group supervision sessions provided to Arab-Palestinian social workers who worked in the *Families First* program. The supervision was provided on a regular basis, once every 2 weeks from August 2019 to May 2020 (exact dates appear after each quotation). The aim of the supervision was to support the social workers, to help them work through the challenges they encountered, and to create space for critical reflection (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Newcomb, 2021) that would enable them to resist othering (Krumer-Nevo, 2020) and improve their practice. The supervision sessions made possible the development of close relationships of a kind less likely to develop in a single encounter during an interview. The closeness that was created thanks to the regular sessions enabled the social workers to bring up their dilemmas, difficulties, and questions openly and deeply, creating a rich body of data.

Each session lasted one and a half hours and was held in Arabic. The supervisor was an experienced Arab-Palestinian social worker who is also a scholar and the first author of this article. The social workers signed a consent form after they were provided with a detailed explanation regarding the study. They were aware that the supervisor was documenting the sessions for her own supervision, while protecting their anonymity and privacy, and gave their permission for this to take place.

They were told that if they did not want to participate in the study, what they said would not be included in the analysis. All the social workers agreed to participate in the study. Their personal details and those of the service users that appear in the article have been changed to maintain the privacy and anonymity. The study received ethical approval from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and from the Research Department of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services.

### **Participants**

Fourteen social workers, 10 Muslim and 4 Druze, participated in the supervision. Their ages ranged from 24 to 38 years and their professional experience ranged from 3 to 10 years. All held bachelor's degrees in social work. They worked in Muslim, Druze, and mixed (Muslim, Druze, and Christian) villages and small towns in northern Israel.

### **Analysis**

We conducted a systematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that consisted of four phases. First, an in-depth, explorative holistic reading of the sessions led to the identification of all the excerpts that related to poverty. Second, an in-depth analysis of these excerpts produced themes, such as barriers connected to material lacks and barriers connected to social exclusion. After each of the themes was analyzed separately in the third phase, all the themes were collected in the fourth phase and sorted into three broad categories: barriers involving economic deprivation; sociopolitical barriers; and cultural/political barriers. The first three phases were conducted separately by each of the two authors to prevent bias. The fourth phase was conducted by both authors together. Study rigor was ensured by means of peer examination throughout the analysis.

### **Findings**

The local context of Arab-Palestinian society in Israel is characterized by a multiplicity of political, social, cultural, economic, and gender-based power structures and exclusionary mechanisms. The social workers related to barriers of three kinds that intersect in shaping poor families' lives, inhibiting their economic empowerment and full participation in society: barriers involving economic deprivation; sociopolitical barriers, which involve the reduction of opportunities and social resources; and barriers related to the cultural/political contexts of the community. Thus, sociopolitical barriers reinforce cultural/political barriers and intensify material deprivation. In addition, the intersections of gender, class, religion, and place of residence produce unique variations in the various barriers.

#### **Material barriers**

First and foremost, the social workers related to the severe material shortage of the most fundamental needs pertaining to the very existence and basic security of families. It became clear that there was a severe shortage of food: 'The family doesn't have food, so the children aren't sent to school regularly' (Amal, 2 December 2019).

In addition, the social workers described unsuitable and unsafe housing conditions that put people in real risk, including severe overcrowding, damp and leaks, and houses without windows, doors, proper stairs, and railings. 'I helped the family finance the renovation of the bathrooms because it is really impossible to be in them, especially in winter. They are very cold and have no windows' (Laila, 16 January 2020). 'I recruited someone who works in carpentry and was willing to hang doors for the family, since there were no interior doors' (Afaf, 9 September 2020).

Moreover, there was a lack of essential appliances such as refrigerators, dining tables, and cupboards and a shortage of medications and other medical necessities: ‘The husband has no steady employment and the wife is pregnant . . . she has a toothache and they have no money to pay for dental care’ (Laila, 25 March 2020).

### *Sociopolitical barriers*

Material lacks exists alongside sociopolitical barriers of two types: barriers that stem from discrimination, exclusion, and inequality at the national level, such as serious difficulties in the areas of employment, education, and the services that support them; and barriers that stem from discrimination against families living in poverty within the community itself due to their inferior status in the local political system. Families are thus doubly excluded: at the national level as Arab-Palestinians and at the local level on the basis of family and clan affiliation.

*Barriers at the national level.* The lack of employment opportunities, in particular good employment (i.e. steady jobs with social benefits and salary levels above the poverty line), and the low level of education in Arab-Palestinian society, which prevents people from being employed in professional-level work, arose repeatedly as factors that keep families in poverty: ‘Most of our village is poor. They all work in building and renovations’ (Laila, 23 December 2019).

The village is in the periphery, far from jobs, there are no employment opportunities . . . most men work in factories in positions that don’t require a high level of education. Women work in the two sewing factories in the village. (Dunia, 10 March 2020)

The geographic peripherality of the Arab localities and the lack of appropriate public transportation were mentioned as major barriers that prevent people from accessing opportunities for employment. Moreover, the lack of a daycare system for children was also mentioned as a barrier for women’s employment: ‘On the one hand, there are no employment opportunities for women without higher education, and on the other, a married woman cannot complete her education due to the lack of frameworks for preschool children’ (Laila, 23 September 2019).

*Barriers at the local level.* In addition to structural marginality and discrimination at the national level, discrimination and exclusion exist at the local level. The lack of political power of families living in poverty means that they are detached from local centers of influence and do not enjoy even the limited local resources:

The director of the social services department has influence over the head of the council because his family voted for him . . . you can see this in the assistance given to our families; there is a preference for certain families who are close to the director. (Amal, 27 January 2020)

The way in which the Arab councils divide their budget, which families are given funding and which are not, is outrageous and frustrating. (Dunia, 10 May 2020).

### *Cultural/political barriers*

Cultural/political barriers include traditional characteristics that shape gender roles and relations and involve, for example, the importance of family, social commitments, honor, gender relations, and religion and religiosity. Although these characteristics are not unique to families living in

poverty in particular, their intersection with economic deprivation produces a unique impact on the lives of impoverished families. While the social workers raised issues related to various barriers, the cultural/political barriers were the most prominent in their discussions and concerned them the most.

*Importance of the family.* The centrality of family and clan in Arab society is a major factor in the social workers' interventions. They describe that they must consider the full range of family characteristics in their evaluations and in the planning and execution of any intervention, even if it is directed only at some family members. The need for evaluation and intervention in the whole family is especially critical in cases of interventions with women and children, since they must be acceptable to the husband or father and even to the extended family:

To get a woman to work, one has to consider whether her husband agrees to it or her husband's family opposes [her working] and whether she has support systems. It is not an easy process. I don't send a woman to work without mapping all the personal, family, and structural barriers together with her. (Afa, 2 September 2019)

*Social commitments.* The inability of poor Arab-Palestinian families to meet expectations and adhere to cultural norms due to material lacks can result in exclusion and punishment, mark them as deviant, and isolate them. This is especially true with respect to weddings, which constitute a major social mechanism of connection to the community and require the purchase of expensive gifts and adherence to a strict, fashionable dress code. Social workers reported that families are often forced to borrow money to 'give back the same amount of money as they gave you at your wedding' (Dunia, 22 September 2019), and that 'clients sometimes don't attend weddings because they have no money to buy beautiful new clothes or are forced to ask relatives for money' (Afa, 14 October 2019).

Among some families, in particular those from the Druze community, social norms require the groom to furnish the entire house before marriage: 'I also see that there are very well-furnished houses and the family is in debt. In our Druze community, there is social pressure on the groom to prepare a fully furnished house' (Dunia, 22 September 2019). In these cases, the purchase of furniture often involves taking on considerable debt and the furnished house stands in stark contrast to the actual financial situation of the family who lives in it, requiring social workers to learn to recognize the material difficulties even in cases where they are not immediately obvious.

*Honor.* The value of honor is of special significance in Arab-Palestinian society and is related to all social and economic aspects of life (Al-Krenawi, 1998). Honor, and its opposite, shame, are connected to the patriarchal system and constitute moral motivations for people's actions. Thus, women and children are perceived as direct extensions of the father and the family and are expected to maintain family solidarity and protect the family's interests (Joseph, 1993). The honor of the individual is projected onto one's immediate family and extended family. Thus, behavior that is perceived as abnormal or non-normative affects the value of the family as a whole and its members are obligated to shun the person who deviates so as not to harm the whole family. The loss of support of the extended family makes families more vulnerable. 'Arab society judges and haunts the son of a son of a son of a son, meaning that the family will suffer continuously for generations' (Amal, 27 January 2020).

The preservation of virginity is a major component of family honor (Al-Haj, 1989; Hassan, 1999). Breaking the rule of virginity causes ostracism and punishment that continue for years even



in situations where the woman marries and lives her life according to social norms, as Abir demonstrates, referring to a woman who has been married for 18 years:

She shared with me that she had become pregnant during the engagement period and married her husband when she was in her fifth month of pregnancy. The story became known in the village and her family members cut off contact with her. (21 January 2020)

For men, the preservation of honor brings with it great difficulties in obtaining assistance, since asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness. Poverty is also perceived as detrimental to their masculinity due to the distance between the attributes associated with it, such as weakness, dependence, and helplessness (Strier, 2014), and the masculine image men seek to project: ‘The man doesn’t want anything from social services, he’s ashamed to ask for help and doesn’t trust the welfare department’ (Narmin, 9 February 2020).

*Gender relations.* The situation of women in poverty is particularly difficult due to the fact that their status derives from the status of their husbands as well as the fact that they must be controlled by their husbands since they are perceived as symbols of male honor (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Divorce is not acceptable and even those who live separately from their husbands, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, are forced to go back to live next to their parents’ houses and become subject to their father’s authority and protection: ‘There are many stigmas that label people, blame a woman seeking a divorce’, noting that ‘the woman is [often] forced to accept [the man’s] infidelity for fear of being accused of breaking up the family’ (Dunia, 10 March 2020).

The fact that a woman cannot stand on her own shapes not only her social status, but also her economic opportunities. Even in cases where a husband abandons his wife and children and completely ceases to support them, she cannot go out to work without his permission or enjoy the legal rights of single mothers:

The wife is alone with the children. They live in the husband’s house next to the husband’s family of origin. The wife is very frightened of them and wary of how she behaves in their presence. She is also afraid to exercise her rights as a separated mother. The husband comes home only occasionally and doesn’t provide for his children. (Manal, 25 February 2020)

The subjection of women to male authority is manifested also in everyday interactions with the social worker:

The father of a client of mine, a divorced woman who lived with her parents, came to me to talk to me about his daughter. I didn’t agree because she’s my client and she’s over 18 years, not a minor. He insisted on talking and I insisted on not sitting with him. The team was surprised by my response because, after all, this was an older man who should have been respected and spoken to. It was not socially acceptable for me to do what I did. (Dunia, 22 April 2020)

*Religion and religiosity.* Many barriers face religious families, especially women who wish to integrate into the labor market. This is especially evident among the Druze, a minority group that devoutly maintains its unique religious character: ‘Some husbands refuse to have their wives go to work or work for strange men, especially in religious Druze families’ (Amal, 25 September 2019).

### *Life in poverty during the COVID-19 crisis*

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the difficulties faced by social workers in their relationships with families. On the one hand, the extended-family nature of Arab-Palestinian society in Israel has

prevented nuclear families from maintaining the isolation guidelines: 'The isolation takes place at the extended family level and not at the nuclear family level. It is impossible for siblings not to see each other or for a woman not to see her parents or her sisters-in-law' (Afaf, 21 April 2020).

On the other hand, material shortages have intensified in scope and intensity during the pandemic period, as reflected in the increased need for food, especially basic food products. Alongside the material shortage, there are feelings of pressure and frustration, so that the request for food aid, which prior to the pandemic was often not considered legitimate by the social workers, has gained legitimacy and solutions are now being offered. Nevertheless, as time passes and the crisis continues, additional needs are arising among the families in various areas, including education, health, welfare, and housing.

The employment situation has worsened significantly during the pandemic, and most of the men who had worked in renovations and construction jobs as well as those who had worked in temporary jobs are now unemployed. The work of women who worked in cleaning jobs was also discontinued.

In addition, limited public transport makes it extremely difficult for people to use social services, which are located outside their villages. The harsh housing conditions also received special attention from the social workers, who have realized the degree to which housing conditions affect health: 'In our villages, housing is crowded, especially in distressed neighborhoods where the houses are close to each other, the families live together, the people are less educated, and COVID-19 is prevalent' (Afaf, 21 April 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis also brought with it greater awareness of the discriminatory and racist attitude of the police toward the Arab population:

I feel that our village is as closed as Gaza, full of checkpoints. The police enforced a closure on the village, preventing people from leaving or entering it. The people don't have money. They go out to buy milk for small children, and the police fine them. The police don't care what happens inside the village even if people die. The main concern is [to ensure] that COVID-19 won't spread outside the village. (Afaf, 21 April 2020)

Along with discrimination and racism, social workers reported on the exclusion of families living in poverty from local politics: 'During the COVID-19 period, you saw that the families close to the head of the council and key people in the council received packages of food several times, while other families did not receive anything' (Afaf, 21 April 2020).

Nonetheless, the crisis situation led the community itself to organize to help its members, even the most excluded families:

During the COVID-19 period, you see unity and mutual assistance in the village. There are advantages to the close ties between people; not everything is negative. Someone who asks for help helps someone else, especially among members of the extended family. (Afaf, 21 April 2020)

Four vegetable and fruit shops in the village asked all the needy families to come and take what they needed without paying and without explaining their situation. (Laila, 8 April 2020)

## Discussion

The extensive literature on multiculturalism and cultural competence in social work has made cultural analysis self-evident, so it is clear that the perception of a minority group such as the Arab-Palestinians in Israel requires social workers to study the characteristics of its culture. But this way of thinking has also been criticized for its supposed essentialization of the conception of culture



(Abrams and Moio, 2009). According to the critique, an essentialist view that emphasizes the culture of Arab society highlights the components of the culture that are different from those accepted in Western society and sees them as permanent components while ignoring the culture's complexity and dynamic nature and the changes that take place within it (Abu-Rabia-Queder et al., 2017; Khoury, 2018; Meler, 2017). Thus, Arab societies, including Arab-Palestinian society in Israel, have often been presented in the research literature in a monolithic and static manner, with emphasis on its traditional and patriarchal character. In recent years, however, there has been more complex and nuanced documentation of the processes of transformation that this society has undergone (Abu-Rabia-Queder et al., 2017; Haj-Yahia and Lavee, 2018; Khoury, 2018; Meler, 2017).

Critical understanding of the concept of culture clearly binds it with social characteristics and seeks to establish how social characteristics affect and produce culture (Abu-Rabia-Queder et al., 2017; Hassan, 1999; Kwok et al., 2018; Suarez et al., 2008). Our findings are in line with this understanding and present the intersection of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural characteristics – poverty, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, and religion – that shape the hardships that families in poverty face as reported by social workers during supervision sessions.

The findings of our study indicate that the social workers identify the difficulties of families at the levels of material deprivation, sociopolitical barriers, and cultural/political barriers. The three types of barriers intersect and shape the hardships faced by families in their daily lives. Severe material shortages of food, inadequate housing conditions, and limited health resources are exacerbated by the sociopolitical barriers that prevent access to employment opportunities and by the cultural/political barriers that bind women to exclusionary family structures and mark families as marginalized and powerless within the community itself. As we have shown, the dimensions of class, gender, and religion also play roles in the specific shaping of the intersection of barriers.

The perception of barriers as intersecting requires a complex theoretical understanding of poverty. The public discourse that depoliticizes poverty reflects prevailing attitudes that see each of the barriers as independent and self-contained and solutions as found in people themselves and detached from their environments. Thus, it is commonly thought that material deprivation should be solved by integrating the individual into the labor market, employment barriers should be surmounted by increasing the motivation of the individual, and cultural barriers should be overcome by changing the values and perceptions of individuals and the community. Nonetheless, a political conception of poverty emphasizes the fact that in reality none of the barriers exists separately from the others and understanding the relationship between the various barriers is critical to conducting interventions. Thus, employment cannot solve material lacks as long as there are no employment opportunities and no convenient transportation (sociopolitical barriers) and as long as men prevent women from working due to concerns regarding honor or religion (cultural/political barriers). Cultural barriers not only affect other barriers but are also affected by them. For example, Abu-Rabia-Queder (2017) describes how the lack of employment and public transportation in the Bedouin villages in the Negev reinforces the cultural prohibition on women leaving the village unaccompanied by men and the limits the hours when they can travel.

The issue of difficult and often physically dangerous housing conditions that arose in the sessions, pointing to a basic family need, is also directly related to social and cultural barriers (Bana, 2011). Here four unique characteristics come together to create a poverty trap. First, the high housing prices in mixed Jewish and Arab cities make it difficult for families in poverty to purchase apartments in them, obliging them to live in the towns and villages where their extended families live. Second, in Arab localities, there is no construction of public housing (Sikkuy, 2014), which constitutes a major solution for poor Jewish families. Third, according to community norms, a man must provide an apartment for his wife upon marriage. When means are limited, construction takes a long time, and is often imperfect even when the couple is already moving into an apartment. The

fact that construction has not been completed, combined with ongoing poverty, results in families living in extreme and unsuitable housing conditions. The fourth characteristic is the systematic neglect of local infrastructures in Arab towns and villages. The fact that these are poor families in poor localities, not poor families in established localities, together with the unique political situation in which Arab towns and villages are denied the possibility of extending their physical borders, weakens poor families and strengthens conservative cultural mechanisms. These factors reinforce the custom of patrilocal residence, which in turn strengthens the extended family's control over young couples and undermines the status of women, who move away from the power base provided by their parents (Abou-Tabickh, 2008; Meler, 2014). Institutional discrimination joins with cultural customs and economic constraints to cause women to accept the tradition of patrilocal residence as natural, even if it involves the violation of their right to employment, restrictions on their movement and dress, and the imposition of limitations on their career development and the exercise of their rights.

The effects of material, sociopolitical, and cultural/political barriers have intensified during the COVID-19 crisis. Our findings demonstrate that the crisis has exacerbated the economic distress of families living in poverty in terms of the extent, frequency, and type of material assistance they require. Thus, families have requested assistance more frequently and the scope of their needs has increased. The closures imposed on some of the Arab-Palestinian areas have not been adapted to their unique needs, and the way in which the police have dealt with this crisis, for example, by imposing fines on families with financial difficulties, has raised social workers' awareness of the discriminatory attitudes of the authorities. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the exclusion and marginalization of poor families by the state as well as by local political systems. Nevertheless, the crisis has highlighted the value of collectivity and the importance of extended family. On the one hand, the nature of patrilocal housing alongside overcrowded housing has endangered poor families, but on the other hand, villagers have mobilized to help and support poor families while the government has shirked its responsibility to its citizens. Arab society's value of collectivity, often described as a barrier to self-realization, has become a powerful force during this crisis, and thus traditional values are being reinforced in a sociopolitical context characterized by marginalization and inequality.

Our research has two major limitations. First, it does not present the voices of the families and their experiences as they would describe them. Complementary research that focuses on the perspectives of families and utilizes their knowledge as a basis for intervention is needed. A comparison between the perspectives of the social workers and those of the families will also add important knowledge for both planning interventions and developing tools for professional guidance. The second limitation is related to the focus on social workers from Israel's northern region only. Further research that focuses on the perspective of social workers who work with other Arab-Palestinian communities in Israel is necessary to provide a more comprehensive picture. Moreover, it is important to further develop poverty-aware analysis with regard to Arab families and other marginalized communities in different Westernized societies, that is, to examine the specificities of the barriers and life situations that families in poverty face. Understanding poverty and its intersections with social categories and cultural characteristics is still a relatively overlooked area in social work research. We hope that this article will encourage further research on this field.

The findings of our study has three main contributions. First, it extends the body of knowledge on poverty and adds the important perspective of practice-based knowledge. Second, its focus on poverty in Arab-Palestinian society and on indigenous knowledge is unique (Weiner-Levy and Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2012). Third, it has implications for both policy makers and social work practitioners. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the intersection of the unique barriers that face families in poverty to avoid blaming service users for their poverty. We see this understanding

as a first step in the development of holistic interventions through which it will be possible to begin to unravel the tangled knot of the various barriers and provide better services to families living in poverty.

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