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# Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif)

## Intersectional politics and citizen activism: An Israeli Mizrahi feminist lens

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Citizen activism  
Coalition  
Feminism  
Intersectional politics  
Marginalised communities  
Israel

### ABSTRACT

This article aims to rethink intersectional sites of solidarity carried out by coalitions of heterogeneous groups coming up from the margins of society. From this standpoint, I analyse intersectional politics through practices and processes led by feminist and other social justice grassroots activists together with citizen activists, that have helped give rise to political visibility of marginalised communities inside Israel. To address this issue, I critically discuss the interconnection of political intersectionality, coalition building, citizen activism, and its implications not only at the grassroots level, but also in local politics and institutions.

This research is based on extensive fieldwork that took place in 2016 and 2018 in the most peripheral neighbourhoods of south Tel Aviv. In detail, I explore the role of one of the most well-known Israeli Mizrahi feminist movements called *Ahoti (Sister) — for Women in Israel*, in creating intersectional coalitions with other marginalised groups that mainly include long-term Mizrahi residents, non-Jewish African refugees and migrant workers. This cooperation between feminist activists historically engaged in grassroots movements together with citizen activists involved in new local struggles represents an original intersectional approach to multidisciplinary feminist research.

### Introduction

This article focuses on the political potential of intersectionality as an effective tool for social change within marginalised contexts. I argue a parallel critical analysis of political intersectionality and women's feminist coalitions from underprivileged backgrounds represents an essential framework for rethinking intersectional activism and its challenging role in linking theoretical constructions and grassroots practices. By dealing with three core concepts, namely political intersectionality, coalition building and citizen activism, I examine how coalitions of heterogeneous groups use intersectional practices to join both grassroots politics and local institutions in south Tel Aviv. The recognition of the intersection of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and religion has been central in the study of these coalitions as each of these variables affects deeply in their dynamics. Intersectional politics includes actions and tactics through which these coalitions have organised initiatives and protests, and have interacted with their own groups, communities and local institutions (Andrews, Cox, & Wood, 2015), relating to experiences of oppression and marginalisation. To address this issue through the specificity of the Israeli Mizrahi feminist context, I reflect on the way

these practices can contribute to analyses of intersectional politics within coalitions developed in underprivileged realities at the margins of asymmetric societies.

By doing so, this article provides an in-depth study on the increasingly significant role of Mizrahi<sup>1</sup> feminist activists in challenging Israeli society, and mainly regarding one of the major Mizrahi feminist movements called *Ahoti<sup>2</sup> (Sister) — for Women in Israel*, not only at the grassroots level, but also in local politics and institutions. I explore and analyse contemporary intersectional politics led by Mizrahi feminists working together with long-term Mizrahi residents and other marginalised actors in south Tel Aviv, including non-Jewish African refugees from Eritrea and Sudan and migrant workers mainly from the Philippines and Congo. The cooperation between feminist activists historically engaged in social movements and citizen activists mainly involved in new local struggles represents the original approach of this study.

A genealogy of the concept of intersectionality can be traced back to Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech 'Ain't I A Woman?' that profoundly inspired more recent thinkers as the Combahee River Collective (1977), bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), underscoring the impacts of

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<sup>1</sup> The Mizrahim, also called 'Arab-Jews' or 'Oriental Jews', are Jews who originate from Arab and Muslim countries.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the article I mainly use the Hebrew transliteration system presented in the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). Furthermore, all the names of the organisations mentioned in the text correspond to their own titles.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102696>

Received 9 September 2022; Received in revised form 23 February 2023; Accepted 24 February 2023

Available online 3 March 2023

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sexism and racism on black women. Firmly rooted in these theoretical pillars, in the late 1980s the term itself was credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw, who examined the intersection of diverse forms of discrimination experienced by black women in the United States through the analysis of court judgments (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Since then, intersectionality has been labelled as a theory and an analytical tool, but also as a political instrument to contrast multiple systems of power asymmetries, discrimination and marginalisation (Collins, 1990; Ferree, 2009; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005; Staunæs, 2003; Verloo, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Within this framework, it is also valuable to reflect on the critical debates generated by Latinx decolonial feminism. In this perspective, María Lugones emphasises the coloniality question and, more specifically, 'the possibility of overcoming the coloniality of gender', namely 'the analysis of racialized, capitalist, gender oppression' (Lugones, 2010, p. 747). Following this pathway, further critiques have also addressed the current meaning of intersectionality, by questioning its status as a depoliticising and neutralising process, and of whitening its original potential (Ait Ben Lmadani & Moujoud, 2012; Bilge, 2013; Bouteldja, 2013; Mohanty, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013).

Beyond the most recognised intersecting variables of race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, sex, it is imperative to acknowledge the role of religion, namely Judaism in this specific case study. It represents a main defining element within Israeli society and a conspicuous intra-Jewish rift that reflects the religious ethnocentric nature of the state of Israel (Lavie, 2014). It is considered an important dimension in tracing the multiple and asymmetric relationships between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, but also towards the Palestinians (Cohen, 2022; Lavie, 2014, 2022). In this perspective, although it was not much stressed by my interviewees, the religious aspect is central in delineating intersectional initiatives led by Mizrahi feminists together with long-term Mizrahi residents and other marginalised groups in south Tel Aviv, especially non-Jewish African refugees.

Thus, alongside feminist and social movement participation, I also discuss citizen activism as further component of intersectional grassroots coalitions, considering it to be "any individual action with social consequences, and much of it involves collective activity [...] Such participation is an assertion of 'power with', and is both an end in itself – a crucial kind of freedom – and a means to ensure that society and its institutions respect people's rights and meet their needs" (Green, 2016, p. 181). Starting from this definition, I identify citizen activists as people who are not affiliated with any specific social movement or group but are engaged in more spontaneous and dynamic processes of mobilisation concerning both local and global scales. From this perspective, my analysis of citizens' initiatives and practices in south Tel Aviv contributes to a deeper understanding of intersectional politics at different levels and among heterogeneous actors, and considering the asymmetric power relations emerging in grassroots activism from the margins of society. On the other hand, this also indicates the difficulty in clearly differentiating each form of coalitional participation as they often interact, particularly in the case of parallel struggles for social housing as will be discussed later in the text.

This article is organised into eight parts. The following two sections, by developing the theoretical framework of intersectional politics, discuss the complexity of the concepts of political intersectionality and citizen activism, along with their contested perspectives and interrelations. Subsequently, the fourth section describes the context of the study, namely Israeli Mizrahi feminist activism. The fifth section focuses on the methods used, and in particular on the extensive fieldwork conducted. The sixth and seventh sections represent the core of the research and analyse the role of *Ahoti* feminist activists in building intersectional coalitions among grassroots activists, citizen activists, refugees, migrant workers and local institutions, and how this is relevant in current feminist studies. Finally, the last section reflects on the ongoing obstacles and future challenges facing these forms of solidarity and grassroots activism, both theoretically and politically.

## Intersectional debates and practices

In this article, I mainly consider the political dimension of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) in terms of a process that motivates and strengthens practices of solidarity arising from experiences of discrimination both at the grassroots and institutional level. In several cases, this has helped give rise to political visibility of marginalised groups within these movements. In recognising the importance of deepening the discourse between intersectionality, social movements and feminist research, the existing literature has recently articulated several ways through which intersectional politics can be considered fundamental to strengthen social movements and grassroots activism (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Luna, Jesudason, & Kim, 2020; Montoya, 2021; Roth, 2021).

In this direction, some scholars have mostly underlined the concern of addressing different overlapping forms of marginality and discrimination in order to achieve social empowerment (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2013; Laperrière & Lépinard, 2016). Others have explored in depth the applicability and efficacy of intersectionality in social movements that have attempted to bridge diverse underrepresented segments of society, as shown by widely recognised cases in Europe and in the US (Einhöner et al., 2019; Gawerc, 2019; Irvine, Land, & Montoya, 2019; Luna et al., 2020; Montoya, 2021; Roth, 2021). This theoretical background stresses the increasing interest in studying coalitions characterised by internal differences and divisions, but able to create sites of intersectional solidarity, especially among marginalised communities. Accordingly, the goal of this article is to further explore such cooperation initiatives that can be considered as a model, though in precarious and temporary formats at times, both at the grassroots level and within local institutions.

Beyond European and North American contexts, more research is required to address alternative dimensions on the topic and to dialogue with other experiences in the Global South. On the pathway of Edward Said's (1983) 'traveling theory', intersectionality has moved from Black and postcolonial feminism to Latinx decolonial feminism, up to feminist scholars and movements in the Global North, as mainly in Europe and in the US (Salem, 2018). If on the one hand this process has partially diminished the initial potential of intersectionality, on the other hand an increasing criticism has helped revitalise the concept and its practice in new fields, such as in Middle East women's studies. This article aims to advance this debate, by examination of the intersectional practices and initiatives of Israeli Mizrahi feminists in south Tel Aviv.

At the basis of framing experiences of coalitions based on internal heterogeneity that nonetheless become unified actors (Carastathis, 2013, p. 945), forms of struggle and modes of resistance going beyond the so-called 'single axis approach' serve as examples for exploring and examining intersecting axes of difference (Okechukwu, 2014, p. 156). In setting up coalitions that aim at developing intersectional politics in peripheral contexts as in south Tel Aviv, another conceptual tool and form of political engagement helping this analysis is known as 'transversal politics'. This highlights the multiplicity of differences among activists and their potential for creating coalitions based on processes of 'rooting' in one's own specific context, and 'shifting' towards other possible perspectives and coalitional politics (Collins, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 1999, 2012).

## Re-politicising intersectionality and citizen activism

In the last decade new grassroots initiatives have been able to re-politicise citizens (Green, 2016; Islar & Irgil, 2018), particularly in the aftermath of significant social movements across many different realities throughout the world. Starting from the Arab Springs in several

countries of North Africa and Middle East to the Indignados in Spain, from Occupy Wall Street in the US to Gezi Park in Turkey, and further instances of transnational mobilisation such as the Black Lives Matter and Ni Una Menos.<sup>3</sup> An important aspect of these protests and struggles has been the inclusion of people with no previous experience in social movements nor political parties. From this perspective, the role of citizens has also been influential in enabling profound transformations in their everyday lives, as well as in becoming politically active players. Elements of cooperation, networking, diversity, and solidarity have become central for integrating a variety of actors and local transformations in which intersectional strategies have helped formulate more inclusive policies.

This involves not only recognising internal differences, but also adopting concrete steps to take on the complex work of building solidarity and intersectional coalitions, or to cite Sara de Jong (2017), by 'resisting divisions, establishing connections through experience, recognizing the instability of one's own position, and solidarity as a process rather than a given' (p. 159). A wide range of studies have shown both successful outcomes and problematic cases of intersectional politics, mostly at the organisational level and in terms of feasible applicability, in diverse social and political contexts. By adopting collective frames, several initiatives have suggested concrete steps to turn intersectionality into political practices in order to overcome inequalities and marginalisation based on race, class and gender divides (Heaney, 2019; Ishkanian & Peña Saavedra, 2019; Tungohan, 2016).

In particular, feminist studies on the role of disadvantaged subgroups in grassroots politics have problematised ongoing internal power relations and interlocking systems of domination. In a parallel way, they have stressed that these marginalised subgroups might raise empowering forms of intersectional mobilisation (Brown, Ray, Summers, & Fraistat, 2017; Terriquez, 2015). Expanding my theoretical framework on this previous literature centred on race, gender and class narratives, to the Israeli context, I shed light on further factors, particularly the religious element, ethnic power hierarchies and exclusivist policies, as the main obstacles in achieving tangible results of intersectional politics in asymmetric and fragmented societies. Through this perspective, I highlight the complexity of creating intersectional coalitions across heterogeneous forms of cleavages.

Moving to a further level of analysis and connecting political intersectionality, citizen activism and local institutions through a feminist lens, means dealing also with the important role of those defined in terms of institutional activists, namely 'those with access to resources and power who proactively work on issues shared with grassroots challengers' (Pettinicchio, 2012, p. 499). As these activists affect political and socio-economic changes in their communities, neighbourhoods, and cities, they represent both insiders and outsiders at the same time. Nevertheless, this status does not imply a rigid dichotomy between their roles in citizen activist groups and local institutional politics, but rather shaping intersectional practices from the grassroots to the institutional level towards more participatory and inclusive policies. The intersection of grassroots movements and institutional settings can thus represent a potential tool to influence policy changes (Böhm, 2015).

A notable and recent initiative that has been able to turn citizen and grassroots activism, especially focused on the struggle for social housing, into local institution is *Barcelona en Comú* – *BenC* [Barcelona in Common], which continues to 'serve both as an elected institutional body in the municipality and a platform for different social-ecological movements' (Islar & Irgil, 2018, p. 498). It shows the process of going from

<sup>3</sup> It emerged in Argentina in 2015 as a reaction to recurring femicides and quickly became a collective feminist global movement.

being a citizen movement to becoming elected and incorporated into municipal decision-making is critical, both for maintaining relationships with grassroots movements, and for fighting for policy goals at the local institutional level. By turning the right to the city<sup>4</sup> into a collective right, the resulting political and institutional balance has been a positive experiment (Colau & Alemany, 2013; Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel, & García, 2017; Feenstra, 2015), defined as "a political platform of urban social movements or a 'movement-party' for Barcelona" (Islar & Irgil, 2018, p. 498).

A political experience that can be read through similar lenses of analysis, in spite of a rather different societal context strongly based on race, class, religious and ethnic cleavages, is the one led by Mizrahi feminists in south Tel Aviv. The following section explores its origin and highlights the relevance as well as the main difficulties of their most recent initiatives.

### Mizrahi feminist activism and the political landscape of contemporary Israel

Before turning to my case study, this section provides the context for Mizrahi feminist activism in south Tel Aviv. Israeli Jewish society is characterised by internal power asymmetries and, in particular, the major intra-Jewish division between Ashkenazi Jews originally from Eastern and Central Europe and Mizrahi Jews originally from Arab and Muslim countries (Lavie, 2014, pp. 1–2). This broad distinction is mainly related to the understanding of race and class as parallel and interconnected factors, particularly the persisting disparities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, in which the former continues to have more power and privileges than the latter, and represents the elite of Israeli society. Since the earliest years of the establishment of the Jewish state, the Zionist project relegated Mizrahi Jews to the most peripheral areas of the country with the goal of simultaneously expelling the indigenous Palestinian people and deepening internal cleavages among Israeli Jews. As a result, these intra-Jewish power asymmetries have reinforced political and social fragmentation within Israeli Jewish communities, and consequently led to the image of the Mizrahim as largely affiliated with right-wing parties (Chetrit, 2000; Khazzom, 2003; Lavie, 2014).

However, a tiny but dynamic coalition drawn from heterogeneous realities on the margins of Israeli society challenged this framework and gave a voice to the peripheries and, more broadly, to those excluded from mainstream politics or ignored by the Zionist Left<sup>5</sup> discourse. This coalition contributed to attempts by a variety of geographic, socio-economic and ethnic peripheries to lead social and political movements inside Israel. Among them are the Mizrahim, whose grassroots mobilisation – often called the 'Mizrahi struggle' – represents one of its leading factions, and has supported a number of struggles, all arising from underprivileged and discriminated contexts (Ghanem, 2010; Greenstein, 2014; Roby, 2015). The most prominent examples include the Mizrahi Black Panthers (*HaPanterim HaSh'horim* in Hebrew) in the 1970s and 1980s, formed by second-generation Mizrahi immigrants, and the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition (*HaKeshet HaDemocratit HaMizrahit* in Hebrew) in the 1990s, led by a group of leading intellectuals and artists. Both were founded to fight against intra-Jewish

<sup>4</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the concept at length, it is important to mention 'the right to the city' (among the foremost scholars on the topic, see: Harvey, 2013; Purcell, 2003) as crucial in the debate on the re-appropriation of urban space by citizen activists.

<sup>5</sup> The Zionist Left, including mostly activists of the Labor and Meretz parties together with those who have been engaged in the foremost peace-oriented mainstream organisations, represented a significant political actor in the 1990s and in the so-called 'peace process'. On the other hand, it 'could not digest its own Jewish Arabs – the Mizrahim – as part of the conflict between Israel and its neighbours' (Lavie, 2014, p. 55).

discrimination, mostly based on race and class, and for a fair redistribution of public resources within Israeli society.

Mizrahi feminist activists have been able to contest various oppressive and marginalising Ashkenazi government policies during the last decades (Dahan-Kalev, 2001; Lavie, 2011, 2014; Motzafi-Haller, 2001; Shiran, 1991). Since the beginning of the 2000s, Mizrahi single mothers have started a wider mobilisation against welfare cuts. One particularly significant moment was when Vicki Knafo, a mother of three children from an impoverished town in the southern part of Israel, marched to Jerusalem to meet Benjamin Netanyahu, Minister of Finance at the time (Lavie, 2014, pp. 11–16; Levy, 2015, p. 10; Levy & Kohan-Benlulu, 2019). This movement not only represented a social protest, but a significant intersectional political attempt to overcome the social and ethnic stigmatisation from which Mizrahi Jews had suffered since before 1948 (Atran, 1989; Lavie, 2014).

Since then, this kind of mobilisation has spread across the country, and Mizrahi women have sought to create sites of solidarity and resistance, coming from their common experiences of multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation. This has mostly meant to 'construct a new space for themselves and constitute themselves as agents of their own lives' (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011, p. 660). In addition to the most renowned movement *Ahoti* and core of this article, two other Mizrahi feminist initiatives fighting for public housing have started in recent years: the group named 'The Not Nice' (*HaLo Nehmadim* in Hebrew), alluding to the expression used by Israel's former Prime Minister Golda Meir who described the Mizrahi Black Panther activists as 'not nice' (Levy, 2015, 2017), and the group named 'Breaking Walls' (*Showvot Kirov* in Hebrew).

Furthermore, since 2006, other major intersectional grassroots protests took place in support of non-Jewish African refugees, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan. In most cases, the refugees faced bureaucratic and political obstacles, such as the refusal by the Israeli state to verify and process their status as refugees or, subsequently, to validate it. This represented another central topic in the daily struggle of Mizrahi feminist activists, together with long-term residents, in south Tel Aviv neighbourhoods. The latter are predominately Mizrahi Jews living in crumbling houses in an area where prostitution and drug and human trafficking are routine components of everyday life. In the so-called 'black city', as the south part of Tel Aviv has been referred to (Rotbard, 2015), the Israeli government has mostly neglected to aid these poorer neighbourhoods and their marginalised residents.

Despite the fact that the Zionist idea of Israel as a state exclusively for Jews has continued to persist in Israeli society, there have been various forms of engagement in solidarity with and support of these refugees (Willen, 2019). In this background, *Ahoti* activists' major intersectional struggles focused on providing alternative social housing in conjunction with the long-term Mizrahi residents of these neighbourhoods, and on attempting to stop the deportation of migrants. This planned national government deportation, which was also contested by several Israeli human rights organisations and NGOs, involved mainly Filipino families with Israeli-born children, and African refugees, mostly fleeing Sudan and Eritrea (Liebelt, 2011; Willen, 2007, 2019; Yacobi, 2011; Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe, & Campbell, 2013).

In response to this, south Tel Aviv citizen activists together with Mizrahi feminist activists, led by the organisation *Ahoti*, have formed a local coalition in support of African refugees. This was based on their common experience of being evicted from their houses. Both African refugees, who have been repeatedly threatened with deportation by the Israeli government, and Mizrahi residents, who have also become victims of the current process of gentrification in south Tel Aviv, have taken part in joint intersectional protests, thanks to the support of Mizrahi feminist activists (Shula Keshet, author's interview, 20 October 2018). Several demonstrations have taken place over the last few years; in particular, on 24 February 2018, in a historic grassroots initiative, the streets of south Tel Aviv were occupied by about 25,000 people, according to reports in the major Israeli newspapers (Yaron, Ha'aretz,

2018; Jerusalem Post Staff, 2018).

This background continues to represent a fragmented and complex environment and also the starting point of my latest fieldwork before the COVID-19 pandemic that has further exacerbated these realities. The next sections offer a thorough analysis on the meaning, main challenges and relevant findings of this study.

## Data and research methods

This case study is based on fieldwork conducted in the Tel Aviv neighbourhoods of Neve Sha'anani, Florentin, Shapira, and Hatikva in the summer of 2016 and the autumn of 2018. It involved meeting and talking with local activists and residents. I conducted eighteen in-depth interviews, starting with the best-known activists and people I had already met in previous periods of fieldwork, in particular examining the political engagement of Palestinian and Israeli women activists (Daniele, 2014). This rooted level of familiarity with the diverse socio-political realities on the ground in the last decade has helped me easily join informal meetings, electoral talks and rallies, through which I have been also able to analyse their internal discussions and tensions.

The interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h, during which participants shared their everyday experiences, their views and major worries on the current socio-political reality, and their role in the most relevant activities organised by both feminist activists and local residents in the southern neighbourhoods of the city. Although it was not possible to approach all the diverse segments comprising various political and social panorama in the field, the participants' voices helped me interpret the potentiality of feasible intersectional strategies and actions, especially in the context of social housing. Throughout my extensive fieldwork, I was aware of the importance of sharing the research objectives with the participants, as well as my feelings on conducting this study.

I was also questioned about my positionality, considered in dynamic terms and related to complex ethical questions (Bhopal & Deuchar, 2016; Gillan & Pickerill, 2012; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020), as a precarious female white researcher and activist in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Recognising belonging in terms of 'experiential, practical and affective dimensions' (Anthias, 2013, p. 325) enabled me to have access to the field and to build trusted relationships with the participants, resulting from several informal contacts that I have been able to establish during extended periods of fieldwork in previous years. Within the peculiarity of Israeli Mizrahi feminist activism and their related intersectional movements, the 'act of listening' to heterogeneous voices and perspectives (Levi-Hazan & Harel-Shalev, 2019, p. 389) and the focus on the 'microsetting of the interview itself' (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011, p. 655) have been particularly important. Such a frame has also allowed me to critically analyse internal power relations within the activists' initiatives.

In this article, I took mostly into account the current involvement of *Ahoti* in local politics. In particular, I followed the engagements of *Ahoti*'s executive director during the last two weeks of her campaign in the municipal elections in Tel Aviv-Jaffa at the end of October 2018. She ran a successful campaign based on 'We are the city' (*Anahnu Ha'ir* in Hebrew), used both as slogan and name of a new political coalition. Specifically in these two contexts, *Ahoti* and the electoral campaign of *Anahnu Ha'ir*, I used participant observation, with the intention of analysing the intersectional framework between individual experiences and internal struggles (Cuádriz & Uttal, 1999) within socio-politically marginalised sectors of Israeli society. This mainly involved observing and listening to Mizrahi women and feminist activists in various activities within *Ahoti*, and joining electoral meetings, such as those organised for migrant worker communities from the Philippines and Congo.

## Voices from south Tel Aviv: Mizrahi feminist activists together with old and new residents

The intersectional struggle led by Mizrahi feminist activists together with long-term Mizrahi residents from impoverished and marginalised neighbourhoods in south Tel Aviv represents the core analysis of this article. This struggle is mostly based on one of the major Mizrahi feminist movements, *Ahoti*, that is considered the physical and symbolic locus around which the major shared struggles of activists and residents have originated in south Tel Aviv in the last decades. Since the early 2000s, they have created an alternative pathway within Israeli civil society by connecting the most underprivileged and oppressed groups through what they have defined as 'feminism of colour' (Daniele, 2014, p. 69).

As my extensive fieldwork indicates, this means Mizrahi feminist activists have played a direct role in creating intersectional coalitions with citizen activists (including mainly long-term Mizrahi residents), together with social and political grassroots organisations, migrants, and refugees, and in forcing the Israeli government to rethink its policies towards the most marginalised and underrepresented communities living on the periphery of the Israeli state. In the construction of networks of solidarity in these neighbourhoods, they have tackled several dominating structures by recognising their own internal differences along with their mutual connections. As stressed by most of my interviewees, this was primarily achieved by questioning the separation of Jews and non-Jews, of citizens and non-citizens, of white and black people, and the resulting system of discrimination and subjugation.

With the aim of connecting struggles for socio-economic equality with those for ethnic and racial equality, Mizrahi feminist activists have shared common demands and objectives with the most underprivileged communities at the margins of Israeli society. The main issue of overcoming social and economic inequalities provided a thread able to sew together the diverse realities of everyday injustice experienced by heterogeneous groups and communities. These communities have proved how the use of intersectional politics can overcome social, class, gender, religious and ethnic cleavages within the grassroots context of Israel and, in a parallel way, increases the potential of citizen activism from the margins of society. This cooperation between feminist activists historically engaged in grassroots movements together with citizen activists mainly involved in new local struggles offers an original approach to intersectional politics in the Middle East women's studies context.

These shared intersectional struggles have gained increasing support among other Israeli social movements, as demonstrated by contemporary protests regarding the ongoing gentrification of peripheral neighbourhoods of Israel's biggest cities, and the consequent forced evictions of long-standing Mizrahi residents to build new luxury apartment buildings. The way in which they have suffered common realities of poverty and discrimination and been denied basic human rights has brought these heterogeneous political actors closer, and has allowed them to dismantle the dichotomy of 'us' (Jewish people and long-term citizens) versus 'them' (non-Jewish people and newly-arrived immigrants), which has always been supported by the Israeli right-wing. This changing narrative represents something highly complex and controversial, and hard to accept in Israeli society, which is historically founded on deep ethno-nationalist and religious pillars.

When reflecting on such initiatives, it is also necessary to consider that most Israeli grassroots movements and struggles, including *Ahoti*, have passed throughout processes of 'NGO-ization'. One of their main sponsors has been the New Israel Fund (NIF), the US-based funder that has supported the majority of Israeli human rights and civil society NGOs (Lavie, 2014, p. 10) since its foundation in 1979.<sup>6</sup> As a result, this has implied transformations in the activists' agenda and objectives

<sup>6</sup> Further projects funded by NIF are available on their website: <https://www.nif.org>.

(Lavie, 2014, pp. 59–62). A recent example is the social project *Power to the Community* funded by NIF and led by *Ahoti* together with other two veteran NIF grantees dealing with refugees' and migrant workers' rights, the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants and the Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ASSAF).<sup>7</sup> The main aim of the project was 'to fill the gap left by government neglect and solve some of the most pressing issues, together with a large group of south Tel Aviv residents and asylum seekers, in terms of legal aid, health care, housing, schools' (Keshet, 2018, author's interview). This clearly demonstrates how complex the interplay between donors and activists' agendas following global trends is, as in the last decade global advocacy for refugees' rights has been at the core of NGOs funding.

In promoting themselves as an alternative to this approach, a more recent movement called *Shovrot Kirov* has attempted to dismantle the systemic issue of the so-called 'NGO triangle' (Reiff, 2022), focusing on the public housing struggle, particularly against the evictions happening in the Tel Aviv neighbourhood of Givat Amal. Considering the three main actors involved in civil society organisations, namely experts, clients and donors, their political experiment proposes the creation of a new category through which 'the clients themselves would be at the forefront of the struggle for their rights, and their funding would come primarily from small donations enabling the movement to maintain its independence' (Reiff, 2022). In fighting for more equitable housing conditions, they have cooperated with other marginalised actors, mainly with Palestinian single mothers from Jaffa, severely damaged by growing systems of gentrification.<sup>8</sup>

As already discussed in other feminist contexts in the Global South (Merry, 2006; Sangtin Writers Collective & Nagar, 2006), also in the case of Israeli Mizrahi feminist activism the controversial role of donors in shaping and influencing local struggles and projects has become clear. For this reason, it is essential to reflect on the deep entanglement of funding conditions and activists' empowerment both at the grassroots level and within local institutions. The next section will explore the main *Ahoti*'s challenges as it transforms from a leading grassroots organization in Israeli civil society into a political actor in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa council.

## Changing from within: a new intersectional pathway

Nonetheless, as evidenced by the interviews and participant observation I conducted, internal troubles and contradictions have arisen. In addition to what existing literature already illustrated on intersectional coalition building's major obstacles, including organisational dynamics, social ties, power asymmetries, and differences in identity and ideological narratives (Gawerc, 2019; Staggenborg, 2015; Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010), further problematic questions have become apparent in establishing these intersectional coalitions in south Tel Aviv. In this specific case study, it is evident that a large part of long-standing Mizrahi residents come from nationalist right-wing backgrounds and vote for Netanyahu's Likud, or religious right-wing parties, as generally opposed to feminist and social movement activists coming from the same marginalised contexts. While these communities share the same complicated everyday living conditions, they are politically divided into opposing blocks. In such a framework, this intersectional cooperation

<sup>7</sup> Data on the two main Israeli NGOs fighting for refugees' and migrant workers' rights – Hotline for Refugees and Migrants and the Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ASSAF) – are available on their respective websites: <https://hotline.org.il/en/main/> and <https://assaf.org.il/en/>.

<sup>8</sup> In the last decade, the Mizrahi struggle has occurred more on Facebook than in the streets. For this reason, in parallel to the outcomes of my fieldwork, I also present some reflections on new movements and coalitions that have recently started, along with the ongoing online debate on their core struggles. See more about the movement *Shovrot Kirov* on their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ShovrotKirov>.

between marginalised people has appeared simpler when dealing with social issues, yet more difficult when dealing with ethno-national and racial cleavages.

Rather, socio-economic exclusion has fostered far more intersectional solidarity between Mizrahi feminist activists, Mizrahi residents, migrant workers and refugees, than other joint political projects. Though coalition building is always difficult to sustain due to national, ethnic, racial, religious, class, gender divides between heterogeneous marginalised groups (Bystydziński & Schacht, 2001; Gawerc, 2019), this study shows that examples of intersectional politics can succeed on some fronts while failing on others. Indeed, it has been easier to unite heterogeneous marginalised groups over socio-economic issues, such as the right to public housing historically led by Mizrahi single mothers and feminist activists, than to increase political awareness or attempt to counter ethno-racial intolerance and rising acts of violence against non-Jewish people.

In such a fragmented and hostile context, as it was defined by most of my interviewees, a rather successful intersectional political project has been *Anachnu Ha'ir*, 'a party that welcomes Jews, Arabs, migrants and asylum seekers' (Keshet, 2018) and succeeded in the 2018 municipal election for the Tel Aviv-Jaffa council. As a unique, new, paradigmatic political actor entering a mainstream scenario dominated by the right- and left-wing dichotomy, and by predominantly male middle-class Ashkenazi politicians, *Anachnu Ha'ir* represents a joint Arab-Jewish coalition with its campaign posters and slogans appearing in both Hebrew and Arabic. This clearly contradicted the recent Jewish nation-state law, that came into effect on 19 July 2018 and explicitly confirms Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, namely, Israel is first and foremost the state of Jews, and only Jews are eligible for the right of self-determination. This law endeavours to advance the status quo by continuing the Israeli regime's ongoing settler-colonial project and system of apartheid (Zureik et al., 2019). In contrast, the *Anachnu Ha'ir* project shed light on the heterogeneity of Israeli society, with its internal contradictions and conflicts, but also on its parallel struggles led by citizens through social and political grassroots activism. It included Palestinian citizens of Israel from Jaffa, Israeli Jewish social activists from the marginalised neighbourhoods of south Tel Aviv (mostly Mizrahim), and progressive middle-class Jewish Ashkenazim from central and north Tel Aviv.

A coalition led by the popular showman Assaf Harel, together with the Mizrahi feminist activist and *Ahoti* chairwoman Shula Keshet and the Palestinian lawyer and activist Amir Badran, suggested an alternative and varied picture of Tel Avivian citizen activists, deeply involved in people's everyday lives and interested in uniting intersectional struggles. Despite the complex reality described above, this new political project showed how deep connections can be made in the daily lives and struggles of heterogeneous communities, including refugees and migrant workers from Sudan, Eritrea, Colombia, the Philippines, Congo, and Nepal, and how different parts of the city can be linked by means of joint initiatives in the field. Among the activists supporting this project, Elad Zamir underlined the uniqueness of this intersectional coalition as the only feasible political option to change the status quo:

This list is special because, as a combination between south Tel Aviv and Jaffa and the rest of the city, it is something unusual. What we can see is that there are different lists that have different proposals, but this is something unique representing mainly Jaffa and south Tel Aviv, it has an activist's outlook. (Elad Zamir, author's interview, 18 October 2018).

As previously mentioned, the biggest risk to everyone living in these neighbourhoods continues to be eviction from their homes, and forced separation from their families, not only for African refugees and migrants, but also for long-term Mizrahi residents. Looking at these interconnected phenomena, in several cases Mizrahi families have been evicted by right-wing Mizrahi slumlords. Instead of renting an apartment to a single family, landlords converted their properties into bunk

bed hostels for African refugees and therefore quadrupled their rental incomes. For this reason, Mizrahi feminist activists, together with long-term residents and refugees, launched a campaign entitled *South Tel Aviv Against Deportation* to stand against the deportation of African refugees, denounce violations, and assist people who have lost their homes. In this way, they have sought to dismantle the false demagoguery that the arrival of African refugees has increased suffering and poverty. In contrast, their campaign has focused on the general conditions shared by everyone living in the south Tel Aviv neighbourhoods.

After being elected as chair of the neighbourhood of Neve Sha'an in south Tel Aviv in May 2018, Shula Keshet was also elected to the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipal council a few months later in October 2018. When I attended several talks and events in the final weeks of her electoral campaign, I heard her explain the reason why she had decided to run and to give voice to unheard people in the most peripheral areas of the city:

I decided to go and run for election because I understood we're in a critical time, we suffer in south Tel Aviv, all the residents here... The most important reason I'm going to the municipality is south Tel Aviv, all the people, of all colours, from all nations, because I see how in the Tel Aviv municipality nobody cares about us, the people of south Tel Aviv. Also, with what I'm doing as an activist, on a daily basis, we have already achieved many things, but in the municipality, we'll have a place that we can influence there... We – the people – are the most important things, not the buildings, not the tycoons, not the rich people, we – of all colours, we have a very important issue. We are for the Israelis, but also for the rights of migrant workers, for the rights of asylum seekers. We won't let the underprivileged communities in south Tel Aviv continue to be underprivileged and be denied their rights. (Shula Keshet, electoral campaign meeting, 18 October 2018).

Statements such as this, and its successful fulfilment in the field through her election, show the relevance of the intersectional practices initiated by Mizrahi feminist activists in opposition to discriminatory policies. In particular, to connect with these communities, a significant choice was made to include on the list the only Congolese refugee recognised as such by the state of Israel, Maria José Kanga, who has a history of involvement in numerous human rights and microcredit projects since her arrival in 2001. It was no coincidence she was also the first political refugee to run for an Israeli council:

I have decided that I want to be part of the municipal council, I want to be in the reality of all refugees and their everyday life, I want to show how poor people live at the margins of this society. The poorest live like animals. I want to deal with the real problems of the people. (Maria José Kanga, author's interview, 22 October 2018).

From this picture, it is evident that marginalised actors have begun forging new political pathways and intersectional politics has become the founding pillar to form partnerships and build up an alternative to the status quo. The specificity of this case study offers an invitation to reflect on the way through which socio-economic issues, notably public housing, continue to be the basis for the most successful common intersectional struggles. On the other hand, this network of activists and citizen groups has not brought about real political change within an Israeli society still beset by increasingly nationalist and right-wing mindsets.

## Conclusion

This article explores diverse forms and challenges of intersectional politics in coalitions led by feminist and citizen activists arising from experiences of political and social marginalisation in south Tel Aviv. In discussing the interconnection of political intersectionality, coalition building, citizen activism, and its everyday implications, intersectional sites of solidarity both at the grassroots and institutional level represent

a critical topic that has achieved increasing visibility in the most contemporary feminist scholarship.

I highlight three main points. Firstly, in dialogue with existing research (Bystydziński & Schacht, 2001; Gawerc, 2019; Luna et al., 2020; Montoya, 2021; Roth, 2021; Stagenborg, 2015) I examine the multidimensional levels of oppression existing within intersectional coalitions in a deeply ethno-national asymmetric background, as the peripheral neighbourhoods of Tel Aviv, among groups of various experiences with marginalisation. In doing this, I emphasise the importance of studying intersectional practices also in contexts beyond Europe and North America. Secondly, this research sheds light on the fact that intersectional politics is crucial in determining significant changes in the engagement of feminist grassroots and citizen activists in local institutions by reaching out to peripheral areas and communities. By considering the role of disadvantaged subgroups in empowering intersectional practices (Brown et al., 2017; Heaney, 2019; Ishkanian & Peña Saavedra, 2019; Terriquer, 2015; Tungohan, 2016) and in particular in relation to local politics and institutions (Böhm, 2015; Islar & Irgil, 2018), I discuss the role of *Ahoti* in leading political interaction of heterogeneous actors, including feminist, social movement and citizen activists, together with migrants and refugees, both at the local grassroots and institutional level. The discussion on this cooperation provides further critical reflection in a field of study that has increased not only in the Middle East, but more widely in the Global South. Thirdly, I uncover significant potential of intersectional sites of solidarity to give shape to inclusive projects in contrast to common experiences of discrimination and inequality from the margins, though they can be more successful on specific fronts rather than others. This might be due to the more frequent difficulties in advancing common political struggles based on ethnic and racial concerns.

In examining practices and processes of political intersectionality in the context of citizen activism (Green, 2016; Islar & Irgil, 2018; Pettinichio, 2012), I also reflect on the current state of increasing politicisation of citizens who have decided to influence local decisions, and eventually to participate in municipal councils. Indeed, I argue *Anachnu Ha'ir* can be considered a valuable intersectional political experiment which drives the debate, while recognising its internal problems and challenges as underlined throughout this article. In fact, looking at the way it has given voice to both long-term residents (mostly Mizrahi Jews) and new arrivals (African refugees and migrant workers), similar intersectional coalitions represent a challenge not only to local government, but also to the policies of the state-driven system regarding the everyday situation of marginalised communities living in the poorest areas of the country. Nonetheless, starting dialogues between heterogeneous social classes and ethnicities and translating local initiatives into national ones still remains an unlikely possibility inside Israel.

Overall, this study reveals how forms of intersectional solidarity combining diverse experiences of power imbalances into coalitional initiatives can still work when only common socio-economic interests are considered, and opposing political positions are not at stake, especially if based on ethno-nationalist and exclusivist environments. Furthermore, the influential role of donors in transforming social movements and activists' agendas is another thorny issue taken into account in this analysis. This main finding contributes to clarify how intersectional politics from the margins can succeed partially, depending on the historical background and socio-political fragmentation of each specific reality.

As these intersectional coalitions are founded on common causes, rather than common backgrounds, I argue this perspective also highlights the need to look beyond the dichotomy between institutional and conventional politics on the one hand, and social movements and grassroots politics on the other. Since there are no longer clear boundaries between the two arenas, they are not mutually exclusive. Taking into account the cases of *Ahoti* and, more specifically, *Anachnu Ha'ir*, I suggest further exploring different examples and contexts of intersectional practices framed by the joint work of grassroots and institutional

actors across the region. Rather than only focusing on achieving political intersectionality within feminist activism, further discussion on the interactions among heterogeneous narratives and forms of grassroots movements also needs to be considered and put into action as both critical inquiry and praxis in this area of study.

### Funder details

This work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) under grant CEECINST/00066/2018/CP1496/CT0002.

### Declaration of competing interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the activists I met and interviewed in the last years for sharing their struggles and experiences. I am deeply grateful to Guya Accornero for her support and encouragement throughout the writing process of the article and Inês Marques Ribeiro for editing the preliminary version. I also thank the anonymous reviewers as well as the Editor-in-Chief of Women's Studies International Forum for their inspiring and constructive comments.

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