State inspection in contexts of cultural and sociopolitical conflict: The case of social services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women in Israel

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Abstract

Inspectors are the executing branch of state regulation. Existing literature focuses on their tasks and operations, mostly with regard to their commitments to the state and their complex relations with inspectees. The present study explores a heretofore-unexamined issue: the playing out of inspection in a sociopolitical context of national conflict and discriminatory majority-minority relations. Namely, it focuses on the work of inspectors of social services overseen by the Israeli welfare state but provided by local or contracted agencies, offered to one of the country's most oppressed and marginalized populations: Arab-Palestinian young women. The research was based on interviews with 25 national and district inspectors in the field of services for young women in Israel, and reveals numerous barriers hindering effective inspection, resulting from having to inspect the implementation of universalist policy in a context of local needs; and the implementation of welfare policy in a context of national sociopolitical inequality. This is discussed in terms of the severe toll that color-blind and gender-blind policy can have on the feasibility of enforcing regulation, and on the potential to ensure that Arab-Palestinian young women receive adequate social services.

Keywords: inspection; regulation; social policy; color-blind racial ideology; Arab-Palestinian young women

Introduction

The 'regulatory welfare state' is on the rise worldwide (Benish and Levi-Faur, 2020). In this form of welfare governance and organization, the state oversees, supervises, standardizes, and either partially funds or completely outsources the provision of services to local authorities or non-governmental agencies (Macmillan and Ellis-Paine, 2021). Central to the sustainability of this trend are

state-appointed inspectors. These inspectors are mandated to confirm the compliance of service-providing agencies with governmental social policy, through routine close contact with policymakers, administrators, frontline practitioners, and service recipients (Hämberg and Sedelius, 2016). Inspectors are also a potential outlet for services to voice claims and concerns regarding lacunae in policy, and consult services regarding the fulfillment of contract requirements and the implementation of policy and regulations (Pålsson, 2020). In many countries, inspection is executed on various levels of regulation – both national and regional – so as to enable inspectors to obtain a broad perspective on the application of policy, respond in real time to divergence from policy, and draw policymakers' attention to instances where present policy is a hindrance toward better regulation or service provision (Munday, 2003).

The present study explored a heretofore-unexamined phenomenon: the playing out of state inspection in a sociopolitical context of national conflict and discriminatory majority-minority relations. Specifically, this was observed in the inspection of social services offered to young women who are members of the Arab-Palestinian minority[1] in Israel and are in need of assistance due to emotional distress, victimization by sexual or physical abuse, or engaging in risking behaviors.

Literature review

The 'regulatory welfare state'

The expansion of the 'regulatory welfare state' has been attributed to two parallel processes, both stemming from the prevalent neo-liberal turn taken in terms of the role of the state in providing public services since the 1980s. First is the adoption of propositions by which the state is not necessarily best equipped to provide efficient and effective services, as it is not always familiar with local needs; and the bureaucracy of state-provided services can be overly cumbersome. Second is the introduction of New Public Management principles in public services, and the growing reliance on regulated criteria and standardized processes of evaluation in decisions pertaining to the allocation of resources (Veggeland, 2020).

Some argue that the balances between 'regulatory' (in the sense of ensuring that policy is applied) and core social facets of the 'welfare state' can, in principle, lead to a more consistent and at the same time adequate realization of fairness and justice; they suggest that the 'regulatory welfare state' can also be a potent force for achieving social goals (Levi-Faur, 2014). In the context of diverse societies, such goals can be treated as being guided by principles of vertical vs. horizontal equity, or equity vs. equality (Cepiku and Mastrodascio, 2021); or in other words, by the degree to which standards for inspection reflect notions by which the best way to construct services for diverse populations is to emphasize non-discrimination and impartial service provision (Healy, 2007), or rather, to recognize the various circumstances that shape service users' needs and distinct characteristics, and prioritize a redistribution of resources that counters societal uneven playing fields (Gooden, 2017; Reeskens and van Oorschot, 2013). A choice of any of these approaches by policymakers, coupled with the latter's motivations in terms of balancing effectiveness and efficiency considerations in the regulation and financing of

state-supervised services, sets the stage for the 'regulatory space' wherein inspectors of social services are expected to do their work (Lahat, 2020).

Inspectors of social services: Roles, goals, and pressures

Currently, a dual focal point can be identified in the literature on inspectors of social services. One avenue of existing literature treats inspectors as the "hard hand of the state" executing regulated indicators, and underscores their role as 'safeguards' entrusted with making sure that public money invested in services is used efficiently and effectively (Van de Walle and Raaphorst, 2019). In this vein, inspectors' defining objective is to realize the vision of "Best Value" regimes (Arnaboldi and Lapsley, 2008), and not be distracted by conflicting interests and agendas between central and local government, or by the often competing motivations of professionalism and New Public Management (Martin, 2005).

The second avenue proposes that inspectors' dialectic position as agents of regulation who are also tasked with improving services, places them at an intersection of responsibilities. As Lahat and Talit (2015) noted regarding community residences and hostels for people with intellectual disabilities and afterschool programs in Israel, the job description of inspectors is often not clearly enough defined, leaving much room for their discretion in terms of the thoroughness of inspection, adherence to set evaluation criteria, and the nature of cooperation that they forge with inspected services. Perhaps as a result thereof, inspectors report being routinely subjected to conflicting expectations – the state expects them to be strict in the enforcement of regulatory standards, while the cooperation of services often relies on good relations, dialogue, and trust (Benish, 2018). Such issues and the dilemmas associated therewith have also been documented in the context of the German long-term care sector, wherein Klenk (2020) found that inspectors felt they had to negotiate conflicting accountabilities as a consequence of the blurring of boundaries between market, bureaucracy, and professionalism-led regulatory priorities and considerations. Her research also showed that the extent to which inspected services, and service-providers and service-recipients therein, felt secure in their relationship with inspectors was key to the effective implementation of regulation. This finding has been re-asserted with regard to Hungarian social services, where such tenets of the cooperation between inspectors and inspectees have also been linked to increased professionalization of services (Kozma, 2011).

The present study's focus on the inspection of social services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women in Israel, contributes to these discussions by adding a layer of analysis to the examination of the goals and challenges of state inspection, insofar as these occur in the specific context of national conflict and discriminatory majority-minority relations.

Social services, Arab-Palestinian young women, and the context of national conflict and majority-minority relations

Extreme disparities persist between Jewish and Arab-Palestinian society in Israel in the areas of welfare, poverty, employment, infrastructure, health, and education (Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov, 2019). Representatives of central government are

often considered as serving the immediate interests of the Jewish majority (Khamaisi, 2017), making for charged encounters between state representatives and Arab-Palestinian citizens and local institutions. Interactions between central government and Arab-Palestinian citizens, mediated by state-appointed position holders such as inspectors, should also be viewed through the lens of the violent conflict between Israel and territories (i.e. the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank) that are not subject to full Israeli sovereignty, and are home to millions of Arab-Palestinians (Ghanem, 2001). Regarding Arab-Palestinian communities in Israel, recent years have seen a transition marked by increased rates of education and employment among women, declining birth rates, and deeper integration into Israel's economy (Haj-Yahia and Lavee, 2018; Meler, 2017). However, several scholars still describe these communities' structure as mostly patrilineal, patriarchal, and collectivist, imposing conservative expectations and restrictions upon women in general, and young women in particular (Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy, 2013).

Arab-Palestinian young women are at the intersection of marginalized positions due to their age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality (Pagorek-Eshel *et al.*, 2021). They are traditionally expected to adhere to strict cultural expectations; their activity in areas such as work, education, and social interactions is restricted, and violating the limits imposed upon them is often severely sanctioned by their families and communities (Miro-Yaffe and Haj-Yahia, 2007; Naber, 2005). In general, the mental health of Arab-Palestinian women is worse than among Jewish women in Israel, especially in terms of coping with anxiety and depression; their age of marriage and childbirth is lower; about a third marry consanguineously; and although the rate of Arab-Palestinian young women achieving higher education is rapidly increasing, their status within their communities most often renders them financially and otherwise dependent upon their spouses and spouses' families (Abu-Kaf, 2019).

As is salient across the Israeli welfare state, social services offered to young women are also provided primarily in the public and non-profit sectors, are regulated by the state, and are supervised by state-appointed inspectors. These services are intended to identify young women at risk; intervene in situations of crises, emergency, and threat; provide assistance on individual, family, group and community levels; mediate and manage referrals, and suggest out-of-home placement or shelter when applicable (Social Work Regulation 1.17, Policy for treating girls and young women, 2008). Public social services provided in Arab-Palestinian localities are considered drastically underfunded when taking into account the needs and characteristics of the communities using them, as well as in comparison to the budgeting and funding of similar services in Jewish localities (Mahajne and Bar-On, 2021). State funding of public social services in Israel is conditional upon matched support by the local authority of 25% of services' costs (Gal *et al.*, 2017b), which, considering the budget deficits that characterize most Arab-Palestinian localities, creates additional imbalances. Regarding young Arab-Palestinians, a document generated by the Knesset's Research and Information Centre in 2016 reported that the average expenditure on assistance provided to Arab-Palestinian girls at risk was 40% lower than on Jewish girls at risk (Yachimovich-Cohen, 2016). In addition to public and contracted social services, various forms of social assistance are specifically offered

to Arab-Palestinian young women by civil society organizations that operate independently from the state, but such services are few, suffer from sparse resources, and have a very limited capacity to provide these young women the scope and sort of intensive assistance they deserve (Kurlander, 2010; Zinner *et al.*, 2022). While in some localities, religious organizations offer support for young mothers in the form of daycare and other assistance, women's engagement with them often hinges on their adherence to religious values, behaviors, and norms (Eseed, 2020). To sum, it is possible to see how Arab-Palestinian young women are consistently oppressed by sociocultural, gender-based, ethnic, racial, and political exclusion (Elias *et al.*, 2019), exacerbated by the broad inequalities characterizing Arab-Palestinian society in Israel, as well as by the budgets and scope of services provided thereto (Gal *et al.*, 2017a).

The present study

While it is plausible that some of the tensions and characteristics surrounding inspection that have been cited in research worldwide also apply in the case of services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women in Israel, a pertinent investigation to pursue concerns is if, and how, the complex sociopolitical context of national conflict and discriminatory majority-minority relations wherein inspection in Israel takes place, affects and shapes state inspectors' work. As aforementioned, this issue has not been addressed by research thus far, and so the current study lays the foundation therefor with the following guiding question: What are the main tensions and dilemmas prevalent in the regulation and inspection of social services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women in Israel? How are these addressed?

Methods

Research approach

The study was conducted as per the basic principles of the naturalistic tradition in qualitative research (Denzin, 2017). Thus, uncovering inspectors' subjective experiences and the meanings they attach thereto was regarded as essential to the understanding of issues at the core of our exploration. In the same vein, our examination was inductive rather than deductive, and positioned inspectors as potential rich informants regarding the conjunction between regulation and service provision.

Participants and sampling

All 35 inspectors whose responsibilities pertain to the field of social services for young women were directly approached via telephone and e-mail, and invited to participate in a study on the adequacy of social services to the gender and sociocultural characteristics of Arab-Palestinian young women. 25 of them agreed to participate, constituting a response rate of 71%. Table 1 shows the parameters of this sample.

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees (N = 25)

Characteristic	Frequency	
	N	%
Gender		
Female	22	88
Male	3	12
National identity		
Arab-Palestinian	8	32
Jewish	17	68
Level of inspection		
National	5	20
District	20	80
Districts supervised[a]		
Haifa and the North of Israel	9	45
Tel Aviv and the Center of Israel	5	25
Be'er Sheva and the South of Israel	4	20
Jerusalem	2	10

Note. Interviewees were on average 55.13 years old (*SD* = 9.92).
[a]Reflects the number and percentage of participants who are inspectors on a district level.

Procedure of data collection

Interviews were conducted using Zoom software, and were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Questions posed to inspectors were derived from the research questions, and included, for example: "In your understanding, what is the vision of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs regarding giving assistance to Arab-Palestinian young women?"; "What are the main challenges you face in inspecting services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women?"; and "How do you cope with these challenges"?

Interviews took place between June and December of 2020, and lasted between 35 minutes and 1.5 hours. All the interviews were conducted in Hebrew. Prior to the recruitment of participants, necessary approvals were obtained from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs. The study was approved by Tel Aviv University's Ethics Committee, and data collection was conditional upon informed consent. Consent was also given to record and transcribe interviews for analysis.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed in line with the stages of Thematic Content Analysis proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2015). In the first phase, each interview was read separately, and divided into units of meaning both intuitively and taking into account the research questions. Then, all units of meaning were reviewed in order to uncover

reoccurring themes. Themes were grouped into categories and sub-categories using axial coding. The final motifs that emerged from the data are presented in the following section. Numbers in parentheses represent interviewees.

Findings

Despite the variation among participants in terms of the geographic areas to which they were assigned, the sort of services they inspected (large, small, in Arab-Palestinian or mixed Arab-Jewish localities, serving diverse communities within Arab-Palestinian society), the level of inspection with which they are entrusted (national or district), and regarding their own personal national identities (Arab-Palestinian or Jewish), the main themes that emerged across interviews were consistent. All of the inspectors perceived national policy in the domain of social services as not providing them or service providers the guidance and infrastructure needed to adequately respond to the needs of Arab-Palestinian young women experiencing hardship or abuse. This rendered the state's expectation that they generate ongoing improvement in the level and quality of such services virtually unrealistic. The challenges and tensions cited by inspectors can categorically be divided into two main themes, described herein.

Theme 1: Inspecting the implementation of universalist policy in a context of local needs

Inspectors all shared how difficult it was to find balances between regulation formulated by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, which treats all at-risk young women the same (regardless of ethnicity), and the immense differences in the needs, culture, and access to services found among both groups. This was apparent from the earliest stages of inspectors' involvement in the establishment of services. Inspectors, who were supposed to alert policymakers to needs that require offering additional services, found that the very idea of 'importing' services provided to Jewish young women into the context of Arab-Palestinian society was met with broad resistance from local communities. This was coupled with the low priority given to social services, and principally to those intended for young women, by local Arab-Palestinian policymakers:

> There is no policy that says 'only for Jews and then for Arabs'. No! The inspectors in the field alert that needs exist, and programs can be set up [. . .] but unfortunately, this doesn't always work out [. . . .] I think one of the reasons is fear, and shame, in discussing this [the possibility that sexual abuse exists also in Arab society, and not only in Jewish society]. Another thing is also the way some [local] authorities operate . . . they are not 'on board' with letting services in . . . not in their worldview and not in their administration. [1]

When services were actually established, inspectors shared that not only were they constructed in a way similar to services for Jewish young women, but the criteria for their inspection was uniform as well. Such criteria lacked relevance to

the local contexts wherein inspected services were offered, and often did not reflect the real needs of Arab-Palestinian young women. Inspectors mentioned that social workers and other frontline practitioners were keenly aware of this complexity, and found creative ways to adjust so-called universal responses to the situations that they encounter. For example, some cited the popularity of education- and employment-promoting activities advocated by policy, as detached from the reality of Arab-Palestinian young women, who often approached services from life-threatening conditions and in immediate danger to their wellbeing. In these instances, criteria for receiving such services were superfluous:

> C'mon: How much freedom of choice does a woman like that have in these areas? What sort of resources are available to her? Family, personal, social resources . . . so much has to happen for her to at all be able to realize the options she has and pursue her own individual choices. [2]

Likewise, inspectors were unanimous in their opinion that the regulations that they were tasked with enforcing did not in any way reflect the very different points of departure from which Jewish and Arab-Palestinian women entered young adulthood. They described how consequently, service-providing agencies had to choose whether to offer inadequate assistance, which could in some cases even push Arab-Palestinian young women further into harm's way; or to apply interventions that are not coherent with policy, regulation, or their contract with the state. Inspectors, in turn, had to decide to what extent they can and do enable this trajectory to unfold – and were divided between their commitment to uphold regulation and their understanding that uncompromising inspection could result in the cessation of assistance that is crucial for Arab-Palestinian young women. In cases of emergency, the latter way is easier, as relaxing criteria was a matter of "no alternative" [2], but these dilemmas grew increasingly frequent as for many women approaching services, routine was often an ongoing emergency, and flexibility felt unavoidable. Note that such flexibility was not only required when making unofficial adjustments in services to match the needs and characteristics of Arab-Palestinian young women as a distinct group, but also in adapting services to women in various locales across the country: "Arab society is very heterogeneous, and sometimes you want to promote something for it – and no, it's not one thing anymore; you can't group everyone together" [2].

In light of accelerated processes of modernization that Arab-Palestinian society is undergoing, inspectors mentioned that even criteria that are applicable to a certain context cannot remain static, as society and the lives of young women therein continuously change. This poses a further challenge for inspectors, and creates a discrepancy between the slow pace of policymaking and regulation setting, and the fast rate at which needs of Arab-Palestinian young women can either see improvement or deteriorate – a discrepancy that they felt they were also expected, by various stakeholders, to bridge.

The inspectors acknowledged that drawing policymakers' attention to gaps between regulation and the feasibility of implementation was an important aspect of their job. However, they pointed to yet another gap that hindered transformations in policy: a gap between the background of those who had the power to shape

national policy, and that of people who were beneficiaries of offered services. This gap led some inspectors (mainly those who belong to Jewish society, like [3]) to admit, "I do not understand [a certain Arab community, services offered to which s/he inspects]" and to feel that they were not granted spaces for effective consultation and dialogue with policymakers:

> We don't have enough representatives of Arab society among policymakers. I say that with sadness, really. I just recently had the opportunity to hire some new workers, and I did not even get any CVs from Arabs, not even one that I could consider. I think if there were more policymakers who are familiar with these sort of issues, if I had someone from the Arab community at headquarters, [then] they could give me advice. As much as I work with Arab communities, I don't know enough . . . I would even think of some type of affirmative action, something to diversify the ranks. [4]

And the gaps did not end there: when dialogue with policymakers in the welfare system did result in conclusions regarding the need to adapt services to the specific gender and sociocultural characteristics and identities of Arab-Palestinian young women, the system was depicted as not having enough political power to actually resolve the core challenges faced by inspectors, for the reasons detailed in the next theme.

Theme 2: Inspecting the implementation of welfare policy in a context of national sociopolitical inequality

Most of the inspectors that we interviewed were under the impression that the policy of the Ministry of Welfare and Social affairs was not discriminatory per se: "I must say that this is not the Ministry's policy. In this area [a specific risk experienced by Arab young women], the Ministry's policy was to reach every local authority that expressed interest" [5].

Disparities between services offered to Jewish young women and those offered to Arab-Palestinian young women were attributed to the Ministry's assumption that universality, or uniform services, is synonymous with equality; and somewhat to a concern of appearing discriminatory:

> The challenge is . . . as policymakers, how can it [regulation] be done in a way that is also precise, and also takes into account that each and every community and sector in Israeli society has unique needs, but at the same time does not discriminate. [. . .] when you say 'Arab young women . . .' I can say – and this is the official vision of my [organizational] division – that we commit less and less segregation, and rather develop universal programs, wherein we also enable some differential considerations. [5]

That having been said, 'differential considerations' did not necessarily manifest in adjusted inspection criteria or assessment methods. One of the main sets of regulations – the State Social Work Regulations – was also described as deficient in this

aspect, both for inspectors and for the agencies seeking to find the best ways to offer services:

> It's the policy for all the services, for all the populations, so to speak. Per the State Social Work Regulations, the regulations stipulated by the Ministry, it's like the same thing: Arab society or Arab departments [of local social services]. The Arab workers, they went according to these regulations, and these regulations are the 'bible' of the Ministry and the departments. In terms of what is actually given to the public, that's something quite different. And it's different not because the Ministry doesn't provide enough, but also because Arab society has been and still is in very bad condition. The departments or local authorities are of course in a much worse situation than in Jewish localities. [6]

According to inspectors, this was the case not only with regard to Arab young women:

> I have not heard of a specific vision for the Arab community in general, or for Arab young women in particular. The vision is general for the entire population; it's not split into sectors. [Neither have I] heard of a vision pertaining to ultra-Orthodox communities, for example. [7]

As inspectors explained, in the reality of social services in Israel, services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women face multiplied challenges: they are compelled to address the same problems that arise in services offered to Jewish young women, or with enhanced versions thereof (e.g. difficulties in recruiting new staff, insufficient funds, vulnerability to budget cuts), as well as with unique issues such as culturally inadequate policy and operational problems within local authorities. Consequently, inspectors observed that many services provided to Jewish young women are not offered to their Arab-Palestinian peers. Multiple attempts of inspectors to rectify this were unsuccessful, due to lack of communication between policymakers, regulators, inspectors, administrators, and policymakers in Arab-Palestinian local authorities.

In the conflicted Israeli social climate, an overall mistrust was cited among those involved in the regulation and provision of social services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women. Local communities' distrust was directed at the welfare system ("There is not … much trust in the Ministry" [8]), and spilled over onto young women receiving its services: "There's always a suspicion that you [the woman] will shame the family, show dishonor, and ruin it for everyone" [3]. This distrust is joined by the distrust of national policymakers toward Arab-Palestinian local authorities in general, and perhaps local communities as well:

> [There are] opposing trends [in inspection of services]. On one hand, there is more authority and … more roles […] and on the other hand, the desire and responsibility of inspection, of regulation, to make sure that resources reach the right places. There's a lot of suspicion in the system that has to be dealt with. [9]

This combination of widening responsibilities and lack of support or cooperation from their natural partners in improving services – local authorities and Ministry

headquarters – generated a great deal of frustration among inspectors. Although this frustration was, at times, moderated by positive work experiences, some inspectors cited local policymakers as the 'immediate suspects' to blame for the limited scope of adequate services for Arab-Palestinian young women:

> Responsibility also lies with those who run this town; you can't throw it all at the state. If the state doesn't finance, if it does not inspect, if it does not provide professional support, that's all true, but when the state comes and says, 'Let's examine our options', and the local authority does not embrace this with both arms, we have a difficulty here: a difficulty with local policymakers. [1]

But to most inspectors, the greatest frustration derived from how budgets are handled in Arab-Palestinian localities, and from the implications thereof for the ability to promote quality services:

> Arab authorities are weak authorities, and nearly most of them are accompanied by an external accountant[2]. It's difficult to get approval for developing local responses. Some localities even shut services down, and that harms the population. I can give you an example: [regarding] a sorely needed program, an external accountant or a local treasurer say that they're no longer willing to support it, there's a problem with the matching funding. A large portion of the [local] departments return funding, [as] they don't manage to use it. [. . .] the local authority is in such a financial deficit that developing services is impossible. [10]

And so, a closed cycle of barriers to the inspection, regulation, and improvement of services forms in the intersection between a myriad of failures; needs are not adequately identified; local policy does not prioritize responses; Ministerial policy is detached from local realities and from the intersection of risks experienced by Arab-Palestinian young women; funds are lacking; and even when all other issues are resolved, budgets cannot be used, or – if services eventually are established – they suffer the same shortages of existing responses. Considering this, inspectors reported that fulfilling their assigned roles was "clearly much more complicated than in Jewish localities" [4].

Accordingly, solutions cited to facilitate better inspection were: increasing the number of inspectors and policymakers from the Arab-Palestinian community; incorporating more flexibility into the use of resources in Arab-Palestinian localities; formulating a doctrine of treating Arab-Palestinian young women consistent with which regulation could be reshaped; and most of all, discussing issues that lay "between the political and the professional" [9]. This is based on the premise that there is an acute need to bridge gaps created by national as well as local politics for the benefit of Arab-Palestinian young women. The expectation, that inspectors could perform their jobs by 'bypassing' these gaps and keep services afloat, was described as unreasonable, and inspectors felt incapable of executing regulation properly as long as broader issues were not tackled. As [2] proposed, "the cultures here in Israel are not something that you can ignore".

Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal the effect of sociopolitical contexts on the inspection of social services. As aforementioned, literature on inspection and regulation focuses mostly on one of two aspects of inspection mechanisms: the first explores the extent to which such mechanisms ensure that the state gets the highest 'return on [public] investment' or 'best value for money' in social services (Burmester and Wohlfahrt, 2020; Fresno *et al.*, 2019); and the second addresses challenges emergent in inspectors' work, and emphasizes the tension between enforcement and professionalization (Benish *et al.*, 2018). These aspects can be conceptualized as pertaining to either relations between the state and its assigned inspectors, or to relations between inspectors and inspectees. However, the current examination has shown that in some cases, the relations between the state and inspectees can have a detrimental effect on inspectors' ability to carry out their assigned roles as agents of regulation. As we have shown, the inspectors who participated in our study actively sought to find productive balances between the barriers they encounter, both toward enforcing regulation and for improving or facilitating services. However, essential elements of these barriers lie outside the scope of their control.

The first such element is the basic paradigm guiding policymakers at Israel's Ministry of Welfare and Social affairs. The credo underlying regulations formulated by the Ministry was described as providing identical criteria for the efficiency and effectiveness of services offered to diverse social groups in Israel. This universalist approach plausibly assists the Ministry in obtaining comparable data on needs and resources of all recipients of social services nationwide (Fernandez *et al.*, 2020). It may also protect services offered to minority groups from being handled separately in discussions on public expenditure, which, in Israel's polarized political landscape, could subject them to increased vulnerability (Lustick, 2019). No less so, as mentioned by some interviewees, it can, to some extent, protect policies from appearing discriminatory. However, we would like to argue that, in terms of achieving regulatory and inspection improvement goals, what is gained by this approach's potential strengths may be superseded by its shortcoming. The implied preference of equality over equity in the regulation and budgeting of services offered to young women from minority backgrounds impedes inspectors' ability to fulfill their designated roles. While inspectors are guided by regulation that, at least at face value, treats all recipients of social services equally, it is executed on an unlevel playing field, raising questions regarding the usefulness of criteria to ensuring the quality of services; and perhaps more so, regarding policymakers' accountability for inadequacies in service provision and administration.

In his writing on the Israeli welfare state and its treatment of Arab-Palestinian citizens, Rosenhek illustrates how core components of this state (such as the Child Benefit Scheme) are rooted in mechanisms that reduce Arab-Palestinian citizens' access to assistance that is purportedly universally delivered. He also pointed to the ways in which Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel are habitually completely excluded from other dimensions of the welfare state, such as the distribution of housing assets by the state, which in turn affects their geographical, economic, and social mobility, and showed how such decisions are rationalized by political

considerations of colonialism, state-building, and division (Rosenhek, 1999, 2004; Rosenhek and Shalev, 2000). Shalev (2010, 2016) has also cited the influence of such considerations on the development of the republican citizenship discourse (Dagger, 2002) in Israel, which, underscored by the severe social and financial costs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and solidified by state-institutionalized practices of exclusion from spheres such as employment and other venues for social mobility, renders the Israeli welfare state fertile soil for promoting equality and equity on one hand, yet entrenching the low socio-economic status of its Arab-Palestinian citizens on the other. In a recent detailed analysis of the reconfiguration of services for at-risk children and youth in Israel, Maron (2021) showed how decisions regarding the Israeli welfare state can be driven by technocratic, de-politicized arguments concerning 'responsible' social spending, even when their implications for social service users and providers are foremost a matter of social policy. He also demonstrated how professional claims can be weakened and even delegitimized through entrepreneurial maneuvers of advancing pseudo-neutral economic ideas. Our findings add to these understandings on two levels. Firstly, while previous research has focused mainly on how decisions led by broad political considerations and interests that are arguably foreign to the social domain are applied to social services and assistances, our examination reveals the role played by approaches from within the professional field of social service regulation in shaping policies that ultimately impede the provision of adequate services to Arab-Palestinian young women. Secondly, they reveal how such internal mechanisms of regulation and inspection, when placed in the wider context of majority-minority relations, are not equipped or able to significantly relieve the disparities that characterize the lives of Arab-Palestinian women who are in need of social services, and how this is paradoxically justified by equality-promoting approaches.

This state of affairs can be described as a particular case of "color-blind racial ideology" (Annamma et al., 2017), which often manifests in ignoring diverse identities and characteristics, using justifications of non-discrimination (Block, 2016) or in the underestimation of systematic racism's role in the creation and sustainment of needs (Okah et al., 2021). Although not definitively stemming from discriminatory motivations, policy driven by color-blind racial ideology effectively nurtures institutional racism, both by negating relevant differences between institutions' beneficiaries; and through veiling inadequate responses to cultural, ethnic, or racial issues via the application of discourses of parity (Atkin, 2004; Meer, 2020). Such policy often does not bode well for the recipients of services, as it may quickly slide from the denial of racial differences by emphasizing sameness, to the denial of racism by creating a false appearance of equal opportunities (Neville et al., 2013).

While Israeli regulators do allow for some differential considerations in the process of inspecting services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women, the attributes, scope, and boundaries of this flexibility remain obscure. As Mason (2019) claimed, acknowledging diversity or intersectionality using unclear principles limits the impact of policies aimed at promoting social justice, even when well-intended. She also argued, drawing from an analysis of the Canadian Liberal government's Feminist International Assistance Policy, that this might be especially true when policy pertains to issues that do not fit well with political consensus and/or challenge purportedly neutral professional discourses.

Support therefore can be found in participants' remarks on the underrepresentation of Arab-Palestinians among the cadre of inspectors. When those who belong to racial, ethnic, or culturally dominant majority are mandated with describing and organizing social realities, it is their voice that is privileged. What it constructs as "universal" is actually a reflection of its values and normative attitudes (Lorde, 2021). Developing criteria for the quality of services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women, using discourse that flattens differences between their life circumstances and those of Jewish young women, means using the authority that comes with being the majority to deepen oppressive links between knowledge, power, voice, and inspection (Young, 2008). When such criteria are set by the state, in an atmosphere of national conflict, this tension may further increase.

Color-blind racial ideology can also provide an instructive framework for the discussion of the other elements generating barriers to effective inspection found in the present study: the distrust between central government and Arab-Palestinian local authorities; the administration and budgeting of Arab-Palestinian local authorities; and the low status granted to social services in general, and particularly to those assisting Arab-Palestinian young women, in Arab-Palestinian local policymakers' priorities. The rapport between central and local government in Arab-Palestinian local authorities is often depicted as a natural development of conflicts that erupted with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, as disputes about land, and as issues of national security on the one hand or of minority national identity on the other (Al-Haj and Rosenfeld, 2020). As Dorchin (2020) suggested, "Notwithstanding the many schisms and tensions characterizing Israeli society [. . .] Israelis do not usually perceive themselves or groups in Israeli society in racial terms" (p. 2). At the same time, the brutal persecution of Arab-Palestinian young women who do not fulfill strict traditional and religious expectations, prevalent in many communities within Arab-Palestinian society, is often treated as cultural tradition, rather than gender-based oppression or injustice (Shalhoub-Kervorkian and Daher-Nashif, 2013). In this intersection between color-blind and gender-blind racial ideology, inspection of social services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women – just like women themselves – simply cannot fulfill its potential.

Any resolution of this situation would thus entail some fundamental shifts in how the needs and characteristics of Arab-Palestinian young women are understood and responded to. When social policy is not committed to defending the rights of a population that is located so far outside Israeli mainstream, frontline services are left to resolve the moral deliberations that policymakers avoid (Levin and Nahum, 2022). This may result not only in inadequate or insufficiently supported service provision, but also in regulation that grows less and less relevant to real-world situations, and in increasingly inconsistent inspection. Efforts to narrow the gaps pointed to by inspectors in the present study can be guided by the experience that they have accumulated regarding best ways to adapt policy to the needs and characteristics of Arab-Palestinian young women. In order to increase the coherence between any reshaped policy and the actual contexts of their lives, key advisors in any such process should certainly include Arab-Palestinian young women themselves, and, at the same time, should be carried out in ways that involve heads of Arab-Palestinian localities and enable harnessing their power toward more progressive change.

Some limitations of this study should be taken into account when reviewing its conclusions. Firstly, this project was set in the context of Israel and Arab-Palestinian society. While clashes among national groups, oppressive social structures, gender discrimination, and challenged regulation are not unique to Israel, transference of the findings should be carried out with contextual awareness. Secondly, to gain a more multifaceted perspective on inspection and regulation of social services offered to Arab-Palestinian young women, it would be helpful to interview additional stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, service providers, and service recipients, in future studies. Finally, interviews for this study were conducted during the more acute stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. The climate wherein the interviews were conducted may have been affected by: the heightened risk that this period posed for women who became yet more restricted to domestic spaces; some ad-hoc changes in national policies in areas of social and health care; and the general sense of crisis.

Notes

1 The term 'Arab-Palestinian' in the present study refers to communities whose status as citizens is recognized by the State of Israel. This sets them apart from Palestinians residing in the West Bank or East Jerusalem, regarding whom national and local policy is codified using different mechanisms and priorities of governance (Rouhana and Ghanem, 1998).
2 In Israel, The Interior Minister can appoint an external accountant to local authorities, to monitor local expenditure and implement proper financial proceedings (Ministry of Interior, 2022).

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