

# Gender, Power and Politics in Israel

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The story of women, politics and power in Israel is fraught with anomalies. Women have traditionally been active participants in the public sphere, but their power has been consistently constrained. They have suffered from systematic underrepresentation, but as their number in the formal political arena has grown, their substantive impact has waned. And while they have scored significant achievements, gender inequality endures. Never have these inherent contradictions been more apparent than during the past decade, when the rising political clout of women has not been translated into sustained power, their increased political presence into effective influence, or their tangible legislative gains into significant socioeconomic progress. These trends highlight not only the ongoing impact of chauvinistic, militaristic and particularistic strains on Israeli politics in general and the depth of the recent move to the right in particular, but also the innovative potential of gender-rooted alternatives.

Until recently, patterns of female *participation* in the formal political arena in Israel did not differ substantially from those of their male counterparts. Women's participation rates in elections have dovetailed with those of men; no marked distinctions are evident between male and female involvement according to sector, ethnic background or geographic distribution. As a result, women as a collective, in all their diversity, have rarely played a distinctive participatory role in formal politics. They have, however, been prominent in the public domain on the level of civil society.

## Emergence of Domestic Feminist Movement since the 1970s

Indeed, while during the first two decades of Israeli independence women were pointedly relegated to the private sphere, since the 1970s, with the emergence first of a domestic feminist movement and, in subsequent decades, of the Israel Women's Network and then of a variety of separate women's initiatives dealing with a range of issues (from violence against

women, female poverty, economic rights and personal freedoms to the formation of associations to promote the specific interests of a range of particular groups such as Orthodox, *Mizrachi*, Arab and immigrant women), they have succeeded in developing critical analyses and generating alternative perspectives on key topics on the political agenda.<sup>1</sup>

This has been especially apparent in the field of reconciliation and conflict resolution. Women have always constituted a clear majority of activists in mixed-gender peace organizations. They have formed a variety of women's groups devoted to ending the occupation, including Women in Black, the Jerusalem Center for Women, Bat Shalom, the Coalition of Women for Peace, the International Commission for a Just and Sustainable Palestinian-Israeli Peace, Isha l'Isha and Machsom Watch. And they have been central in forging a new, human discourse on matters of security and defense.<sup>2</sup>

Only sporadically, however, have women's voices and approaches penetrated into the official realm: in the 1970s with the campaign launched by Shulamit Aloni and Marcia Friedman to combat violence against women and again in the 1990s when avowedly feminist members of Knesset undertook an overhaul of laws related to gender equality. But with these notable exceptions, when both liberal and even radical strands of feminist thought were given concrete articulation, the lack of linkages between the informal and the formal spheres resulted in a marked inability to transform women's political participation into lasting political power. This is especially noticeable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when a bifurcated vision of a male-dominated world has dominated the Israeli political scene.

### Tzipi Livni's "Different Kind of Leadership"

The 2009 elections were, at least in some respects, a deviation from this norm. Ostensibly, these elections had a strong gendered flavor — not only because Tzipi Livni headed a major political party, but also because all involved sought to capitalize on this factor. The Likud's slogan ("It's Too Big for Her") set the tone. By implying, through its crafted double message — Tzipi Livni the individual and the woman — that women are unfit for the highest office, it almost begged for a response in kind. This was not late in coming, especially when it became clear during the last two

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<sup>1</sup> See: Hanna Herzog, "Re/visioning the Women's Movement in Israel," *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.12 No.3 (2008), pp.265-282, and Hanna Herzog, "Between the Lawn and the Gravel Path — Women, Politics and Civil Society," *Democratic Culture*, No.10 (2006), pp.191-214 (Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis see Naomi Chazan, "Peace Action and Conflict Resolution: An Israeli-Palestinian Exploration," in Elie Podeh and Asher Kaufman (eds.), *Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), pp.283-318.

weeks of the campaign that 65% of the unusually high number of undecided voters were female.

The subtext of Kadima's rejoinder, the "Different Kind of Leadership" campaign, reinforced by the "Either Tzipi or Bibi" barrage in the last days before the ballot, was clear to anyone who cared to listen: Women should vote for Livni also, if not exclusively, because she's a woman. Events were organized to popularize this call, specific appeals were issued and a veritable gender buzz was created. Major women's organizations joined in the effort — to the distress of competing parties such as Labor and Meretz — who were unable to challenge the logic of Kadima's female outreach without undercutting their own proclaimed feminist proclivities.

The 2009 elections were the first in Israel's history in which the gender factor played a significant role.<sup>3</sup> Kadima narrowly outstripped the Likud precisely because the personalization of the campaign allowed for its utilitarian feminization. In fact, a 7% gender gap in Kadima's favor proved unequivocally that, in elections with a personal flavor, not only do women prefer to vote for female candidates, but they cannot be summarily dismissed as a political force. And while this game occupied center court, an equally telling story was unfolding within the rival parties as more women were selected to realistic slots on their lists and Balad, the first Arab party to field a woman candidate in a realistic slot, garnered substantially more votes among female than male voters. These findings, however, should not be exaggerated: Substantive feminist discourse was, once again, marginalized, and though the possibility of transmutation of strategic participation into actual power was raised, it was hardly actualized.

In fact, these elections highlighted the growing paradox of women's political representation in Israel. Although more women were elected to the Knesset in 2009 than ever before, fewer are explicitly committed to gender reform. The increase in the quantity of women in public office does not signal a qualitative change either in the content or the culture of Israeli politics.

## Quantity, but Not Quality

Twenty-one women were sworn into the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset in March 2009. At mid-term, because of personnel changes, their number has risen to 24 (a full 20% of Israel's parliament).<sup>4</sup> This is a real increase over the 17 (13.6%)

<sup>3</sup> Einat Gedalya, Hanna Herzog and Michal Shamir, "Tzip(p)ing through the Elections: Gender in the 2009 Elections," in Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (eds.), *The Elections in Israel 2009* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 2010), pp.165-193.

<sup>4</sup> All these figures have been computed from data appearing on the Knesset website: [www.knesset.gov.il](http://www.knesset.gov.il). Since 1948 only 93 women have served in the Knesset.

who served in the 17<sup>th</sup> Knesset, the 14 (11.2%) of the 16<sup>th</sup> Knesset, and the 12 elected to the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> Knessets (10%). These figures, however, hide more than they reveal. Seven parties in the Knesset today have no female representation at all (primarily religious and Arab parties, but also, for the first two years of this term, Meretz). The largest percentage of women (33%) can be found in Yisrael Beiteinu (five of 15), Balad (one of three) and now, after rotation, in Kadima (nine of 28) and Meretz (one of three). The Likud only has five women members (19%) and Labor — before the split — only three (17%).<sup>5</sup> For the third consecutive time, there are more women members on the center-right of the political spectrum than on the center-left — a deviation from the norm in the democratic world. And, even though of the 30 ministers in Binyamin Netanyahu's coalition there are only two women, in strictly numerical terms, Israeli women's formal political representation has improved incrementally in recent years.

What holds true for quantitative representation does not extend to substantive representation.<sup>6</sup> With just a few exceptions, most of the current female members of Knesset are devoid of any history of gender activism and do not describe themselves as feminist (at least two have reveled in pointedly anti-feminist stances). Their parties (including Livni's Kadima) did not highlight women's concerns during the election campaign and have failed to offer any systematic policy agenda on these issues. Their initiatives have focused almost exclusively on traditional topics of female protection (in the home and in the workplace), and their legislative output has been meager at best. This post-feminist climate has allowed some liberal women's views to be aired but has given virtually no space at all to more critical perspectives.

This makes it painfully evident that much more than just numbers are needed. Meaningful representation of women requires a concerted effort to alter gender relations, something that is not being achieved on the formal political level either in elected or in appointed office despite significant laws passed in the middle of the decade, which dictate a gender review of pending legislation and the inclusion of women in all public committees and policy teams (including peace negotiations).<sup>7</sup> If any progress has been recorded in substantive representation, it has emanated from the civil sphere, which has consciously sought to expand the scope of gender concerns to

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<sup>5</sup> After the split in Labor, the five-member Atzma'ut Party headed by Ehud Barak has 2 women (20%) and Labor's remaining 8 members include only one woman (12%).

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent analysis of the differences between quantitative and substantive representation see: Sarah Child, Paul Webb and Sally Marthaler, "Constituting and Substantively Representing Women: Applying New Approaches to a UK Case Study," *Politics & Gender*, 6, 2 (2010), pp.199-224.

<sup>7</sup> See: The Gender Implications of Legislation Law, 2007; and the Amendment to the Equal Rights for Women Law (Paragraph 6 (c) 1) of 2005.

include questions of religion and state, the economy and social justice and, tellingly, peace and security. The biased way these fields are structured is the main cause of gender inequality in Israel — as in many other countries — and their reorganization is the key to changing power relations.

## Vigorous Development among the Palestinian Israeli and Orthodox Women

Gender study programs at the universities and research institutions continue to produce cutting-edge studies that point to new directions for greater equality. But the most intriguing assertions of diverse feminisms are occurring precisely where women have been most systematically suppressed. The most vigorous organizational development is taking place amongst Palestinian women citizens of Israel. A complex network of groups concentrating on everything from professional training, micro-finance and leadership empowerment to previously taboo topics such as violence against women, honor killing and gay rights has been established during the last decade. Female representation in the High Follow-Up Committee of Israeli Arabs — the umbrella organization of Palestinian citizens of Israel — has been secured, and women's issues have become an integral part of its agenda.

In a similar vein, Orthodox women are now leading a quiet revolution which promises to bring them into the heart of the heretofore male bastion of textual learning and interpretation. They are devising creative ways to secure their personal status, even at the risk of confronting rabbinical authorities. Feminist groups are developing new techniques — including the employment of tort law — to secure economic rights. A similar momentum is now apparent among new immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union. And women's peace groups have launched gender reviews of permanent status issues, spearheaded the employment of new tactics against the occupation and brought suits against the government for non-compliance with gender representation requirements.<sup>8</sup> The key developments in the substantive representation of women are thus unrelated to the rise in their quantitative presence in the world of elected politics.

## Inequality Persists in Key Areas of Daily Life

The male-centric crafting of power as expressed in political

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<sup>8</sup> Of recent note are the Van Leer Institute's conference (and subsequent study group) on engendering the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, the Coalition of Women for Peace's campaign on "Who Profits from the Occupation" and the successful petition of Itach-Ma'aki on the composition of the Tirkel Commission to investigate the events surrounding the Gaza flotilla.

participation and representation inevitably extends to matters of gender *policy* and its consequences. The Israeli legal codex contains an impressive array of laws aimed at enhancing women's rights and promoting gender parity. Nevertheless, inequality persists in key areas of daily life. Israeli women outnumber their male counterparts in higher education (close to 60% of bachelor's degree graduates are female, 57% of master's degree recipients and 52% of PhDs), yet the glass ceiling syndrome pertains throughout the key professions (expect, of course, for under-compensated teachers and nurses). While women today constitute 47% of the workforce, they still make barely 70 agorot for each shekel earned by men with the same qualifications in identical positions in the public sector (and scarcely 60% in the private sector). Despite some of the most advanced laws on violence against women, this remains a social scourge; trafficking in women is still rampant. In brief: Real policy gains are not yielding desired results (even though Israel has a National Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women and, for the first time in its history, a deputy minister in charge of women's affairs).

Part of the problem lies in inadequate implementation of existing policies. But, in all probability, what is needed is a long-overdue strategic overhaul. The static nature of policy initiatives reflects the widespread propensity to view women as objects, rather than agents, of change. A real shift to gender mainstreaming strategies, heavily endorsed by feminist groups and research institutes, can make a difference.

Some examples are instructive: the gender-based analysis of the national budget conducted under the aegis of the Adva Institute; the Israel Bureau of Statistics' renewed commitment to gender-specific data presentation; and even the Israel Defense Forces' designation of gender mainstreaming as a (yet to be adopted) organizing principle.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most serious work, once again, has focused on the gender mainstreaming of the conflict and its resolution with a conscious effort by a variety of groups to bring women's perspectives (and not only women themselves) to the negotiating table.

## Status of Women and a Just Society

The move from a narrowly liberal, women's rights-oriented policy outlook to a critically based gender mainstreaming approach depends not only on the empowerment of agents — males as well as females — committed to consolidating a more egalitarian society, but also on a

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<sup>9</sup> See: "Report of the Committee to Design the Service of Women in the Israel Defense Forces," Tel Aviv, October 2007 (in Hebrew).

transformative paradigmatic shift which links gender equality with social justice and equality. This means that space must be made to encompass the experiences of diverse groups of women who have different experiences and, therefore, divergent assessments on how proposed policies affect them and their surroundings.<sup>10</sup> Clearly the status of women and their power position are an integral part of a vision of a just society based on the recognition of differences. Unless women in Israel in all their heterogeneity, just like their counterparts elsewhere, promote basic human rights and insist on compliance with fundamental democratic norms, they will not advance their society and will consequently fail themselves.

Israeli women have always operated in a gender-skewed public domain colored by historical, cultural, instrumental and existential constraints. Despite the empowerment of women's voices and the mobilization of women's perspectives in the public sphere — leading to not insignificant gains in women's rights — these have not coalesced into a more widespread societal transformation. On the contrary, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with its notable rightward shift on the formal level, has not only stifled progress in the area of gender and social equality, but has also sanctioned new forms of sexism — a close kin of ultra-nationalism, extremism, fundamentalism and, sadly, racism.

These patterns have also undermined Israel's commitment to its democratic ethos. In this respect the linkage between women's participation, representation and policy impact is a function of the country's democratic resilience. Women in politics serve democracy not only because they take part in public affairs, but also because they broaden the terms of the public debate. Democracy, in turn, is the only form of government that can promote and protect equality for men and women alike. And, as women know so well, democratic fortification cannot be ensured as long as Israel rules over another people against their will.

There is, then, a direct connection between the end of the occupation, democratic robustness and the operationalization of a gender-driven societal discourse. Without addressing these linkages, the political experience of Israeli women will continue to be dichotomous — simultaneously promising and frustrating — and, at root, disempowering. Israel's political world will continue to be binary in structure and its public discourse will lack the creative tension that makes for constructive change.

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<sup>10</sup> For one example of the tensions within feminist ranks, see: Henriette Dahan-Kalev, "Tensions in Israeli Feminism: The Mizrahi-Ashkenazi Rift," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24 (2001), pp.1-16.