

Parliamentary Representation of Women - The Israeli case¹

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Introduction

Although in most societies women outnumber men, their share of significant socio-political resources almost everywhere is disproportionately low (Pond 1996). Therefore, their parliamentary representation often also follows a pattern of marginality (Githens and Prestage 1977; Moghadam, 1994). There are two basic responses to the frequently-raised question of why women, as such, should be represented in political bodies. The first is the civil — or "liberal," as its radical critics refer to it — argument for women's political presence (Travers 1992). This argument asserts that, in view of the fact that a nation's political agenda obviously influences women's lives, their under-representation in the elaboration and implementation of this agenda deprives a very large public sector of a fundamental civil right.²

In itself, this argument is quite easy to rebuff, as it attributes no specific quality to women's views and preferences. In order for women first to demand and then to secure a voice and a standing in national decision-making bodies and processes, a more substantial argument has to be explicated and acknowledged. This is the feminist argument, which defines women as a distinct socio-political collectivity with unique features, values and interests. The difference between men's and women's preferences in the realm of politics is explained here by two interrelated factors: the clear inequality between the sexes in their access to power resources, and perceptible inherent gender differences. Proximity to the power center, or socio-political location, has been found to dictate the basic political attitudes of both individuals and groups (e.g., Galtung 1964). The second factor, inherent gender differences, is even more frequently cited. Women, it is argued, differ from men in their conception of power and, apparently, also relate to a different system of collective morality (Gilligan 1982; Gelb 1990; Philips 1991). At this point, the civil or

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² Such an underlying assumption can be found, for example, in a roundtable discussion on the political under-representation of women in Israel, organized by the Israeli Democracy Institute: 1993.

'liberal', and the feminist readings of the subject intertwine: in order for their particular perceptions to have some effect on national policies, a sufficient number of women must be present in decision-making circles.

This condition is still far from realized in most countries, although in some Western democracies, such as the Scandinavian countries and other European states, there are some fairly promising indications of ongoing modification in the direction of complete equality in this realm. In most other countries, however, irrespective of their type of regime, women's political standing in general and their parliamentary representation in particular are still far from attaining their proportional share in the population. Israel is a fine example of a democratic, Western-style political society with inadequate political and parliamentary women's presence. Indeed, the optimism which prevailed amongst proponents of Israeli women's equal representation in light of the unprecedentedly high number of women in the Knesset (parliament) elected in 1999 (16 of 120 at the end of the term, compared to only 7 in the one that preceded it), was strengthened with the publication of the results of the January 2003 elections, reaching an historic peak of 18 women parliamentarians. Nonetheless, even today parliamentary parity still seems out of the reach of Israeli women, particularly as even in the last election campaign – which as mentioned above was the most successful one in terms of numbers – women's issues proved to be less than a marginal concern for almost all the political parties.

A number of socio-political studies have pointed out that because of certain institutionalized historical legacies and current socio-political obstacles which will be dealt with in greater detail below, Israeli women were, and still are, far from being on a par with men when it comes to their presence in the various bodies that comprise the political establishment. In other political contexts, however, such as the peace movement, environmental and other grassroots organizations, where these obstacles are less relevant, they are equally- or even over-represented. This disparity suggests that the low parliamentary representation of women in Israel cannot be explained by women's political indifference or their preference for other spheres of activity. Considering that the right to vote was granted to Israeli women from the first day of statehood and even in the pre-state era, with no need for suffragette struggles and with minor opposition only from ultra-orthodox religious groups, the current meager parliamentary representation presents an interesting case study of the effects of subtle, yet at present, apparently insurmountable constraints on women's parliamentary equality.

The discussion below will be divided into two main sections. In the first section we shall discuss the "systemic inputs", that is, the main contextual features which in our view influence – positively or negatively – women's parliamentary representation in Israel. Here we will mainly concentrate

on the election law and the parties' internal regulations for candidate selection; on historical legacies and socio-demographic features of Israeli society today; and will briefly relate to the contribution of women's organizations to raising the issue on the public agenda, as well as the political education and empowerment of women. In the second section we shall first analyze the trends in women's representation in the Knesset since the establishment of the state in 1948. We shall then review their membership on the various Knesset committees as well as the cabinet (Memshala). At the end of this section, before the summary and conclusions, we will discuss the legislative activity of women MKs to explore their dedication to women's issues as an indication of the presence or absence of a specific feminine voice in the Israeli parliament.

Systemic inputs

The legal and electoral system

Formally, in the Israeli legal system, there are no obstacles preventing women from fully participating in politics. The Declaration of Independence, which in the absence of a written constitution, has functioned since the first day of statehood as the basic document of the legal and political systems, asserts that the State of Israel will ensure "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race or sex." Furthermore, the guiding principles of Israel's first government stated explicitly that the state would guarantee women full equality — in both rights and obligations — in the political, social, economic and legal spheres. The law regarding equal rights for women (enacted in 1951) declared illegal any official discrimination against women (excluding marriage regulations, which by state law follow the basically non-egalitarian religious commandment defined in Jewish jurisprudence, the "Halacha"). More recent legislation has also proved to be sensitive to the status of women: The Law of Equal Opportunities at Work (1988), The Single Parent Law (1992), Amendment 6 to The Government Corporations Law (1993), and Amendment 7 to The Civil Service Law (1995) were all intended to improve women's status and facilitate their access to socio-political and economic resources.

The same may be said for the formal procedures for selecting the nation's parliamentary representatives. Every citizen – man and woman alike – aged 18 and above is allowed to vote and above 21 to be elected a member of the Knesset.³ No minimal standards such as level of income or education, mastery of the formal language of the state (Hebrew) or period of residency in the country, have ever been legally set. It should be noted that Israel has an electoral system

³ A major function of the Knesset is to supervise the government, most of whose ministers and deputy ministers are elected Knesset members. The Knesset fulfills its supervisory role in various ways: Every law that the government wants to enact must get the Knesset's approval, including the budget and taxation laws. The Knesset may also demand that the government provide it with information, whether within the framework of its Permanent Committees, sub-committees, and parliamentary inquiry committees, or in the plenum - through debates, motions for the agenda, or parliamentary questions.

based on nation-wide proportional representation⁴ which is commonly perceived as more beneficial to social and other minorities in comparison to, for example, majoritarian systems, since the "winner-takes-all" rule does not apply here and small public sectors can relatively easily achieve parliamentary representation by crossing the low 1.5% qualifying threshold.⁵ (Elections in Israel are direct – i.e., there are no intermediary bodies like the electoral college in the US, and they are also confidential as far as individual voting is concerned.) Israeli voters select a closed list of a party's candidates, and not a particular person on the list. However, as shall be noted below, regulations for the construction of the candidate list at the party level are designed so that the list be "representative", mainly in ethnic or geographical terms. Some, but not all, parties have regulations to guarantee women's representation as well.

Normally, Knesset elections should take place every four years, however, since 1996, due to an ongoing national political crisis, elections have been held at much shorter intervals – in 1999 (less than 3 years after the previous ones); in 2001 (for Prime Minister only, after less than two years) and again in 2003 (again after a two-year interval). The major issue on the voters' agenda has always been national security, not a surprising phenomenon considering the fact that since the establishment of the state and even before it, Israel has been involved in a violent conflict with one or more of its Arab neighbors. The supremacy of the security issue, it is maintained here, has not only overshadowed most other socio-political concerns, women's representation included, but has also undermined – as will be shown below – the prospects of women politicians, who for the most part lack the military experience needed to reach the top of the political pyramid, a position occupied mainly by male former generals, chiefs of staff, and other security experts. Until recently, voter turnout in Israel has been quite impressive – in most cases around 80% (until the 2001 elections for Prime Minister in which the turnout dropped to 62% and the 2003 elections when it was only 68.5%) with no significant difference in the gender base. Moreover, in general, voting patterns of women have been only slightly more to the center-left⁶ than those of men. Most studies indicate that gender plays a marginal role in explaining the electoral preferences of Israelis. Therefore, it is not surprising that the number of female candidates' on the party list proved to have minimal impact on the electoral decisions of both sexes.

⁴ In fact, since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 there have been impassioned debates over the preferred electoral system. Most efforts to reform it over the years have failed. However in the mid-1990s, due to massive public pressure in the wake of a dramatic political scandal, an electoral reform, based on split voting – one vote for the Prime Minister and a second for the Knesset – was implemented. The result was an even deeper governability crisis which led to the re-institution in 2001 of the old – one person one vote – election law with only minor modifications.

⁵ As a result, the number of parties in the Knesset has always been very high with at least 10 and at most 15 parties. In the 2003 elections, 13 parties were qualified for parliamentary representation.

⁶ It is important to note here that the Left-Right continuum in Israel mainly reflects differences of opinion on the security issue (pro-compromise or anti-compromise attitudes in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and only to a smaller extent socio-economic differences (socialism vs. capitalism).

To sum up the electoral issue: in terms of the formal legal-electoral system, Israel is perfectly egalitarian. Proportional representation, particularly in a single-district format can be considered beneficial to socio-political minorities such as women. Yet, this does not greatly help women to get elected, because the electoral system also invests the party apparatus with overwhelming power in constructing lists of candidates in national elections. Since this apparatus is mainly composed of men, there is little likelihood that women candidates will reach the top of the parties' lists on their own or by being assigned mandated slots there. Also the return to the single-vote electoral system compels voters to prioritize their agendas and cast the one vote at their disposal so as to serve their major concern, in which case security will always override social concerns, including women's rights.

Historical and cultural legacies

When established in 1948, the new State of Israel was not a tabula rasa, since it inherited from its pre-state days a considerable legacy of political institutions, norms and modes of operation, some of which served to ensure the under-representation of women. Paradoxically, one component of this problematic legacy, originating in the era of the Zionist pioneering endeavor, was the very myth of women's equality. According to this myth, the Zionist movement, and especially its dominant socialist branch, gave women the same opportunities as men to be active participants in the creation and operation of the new society. However, recent studies refute the truth of this myth. They show that it actually functioned as a smokescreen for what was, in practice, the very unequal role of women, who even in the pre-state, pioneering days, were excluded from positions of power (e.g., Swirski and Safir 1991; Feldman 2000). Furthermore, a recent study has revealed that the mainstream Zionist narrative actually lacked any feminist component. Content analysis of the writings of the Zionist movement's male forefathers and creators reveals that irrespective of the differences between them (secular / orthodox, socialist / liberal etc.), they all shared the same ideal of the Zionist woman (Elboim-Dror 2001). She was expected voluntarily to stay away from the public sphere and concentrate on family life. Thus the Zionist utopias of the late 19th century denounced and even ridiculed the modern, liberated, educated Western woman and her intellectual and political aspirations. The desire of such women to step out of the private/domestic sphere and to function in the public one as well was presented as basically erroneous and destructive. Although these utopias endorsed the principle of formal political equality for women in the much-dreamed-of Jewish state, these formal rights were not meant to materialize. Therefore the declarations regarding women's equality made by the Zionist leaders were not translated into a practical mode of conduct – women held only representative roles in the Zionist congresses and were not allowed into the instrumental bodies or to take part in decision-making processes. These facts notwithstanding, the equality myth, reinforced by the singular political career of Golda Meir

as Israel's first Ambassador to the USSR and, subsequently, as government Minister and Prime Minister, still dominates the public mind.

Another "historical" obstacle that for many years thwarted Israeli women's entry into politics was created by the non-egalitarian legacies brought by new immigrants from their countries of origin, East and West. Many of the newcomers, from Eastern Europe as well as from North Africa or Middle Eastern countries who constituted the majority of the population during the formative years of the state' brought with them deeply-rooted patriarchal traditions, and therefore looked with disapproval on women entering the political terrain. Those who were religiously observant combined conservative anti-feminist perceptions with religious justifications for keeping women out of the public sphere. In many cases, they passed these views to their descendants so that they have not diminished over the years.

Current Socio-political inputs

As in many countries, so too in Israel the obstacles which stand in the way of full political representation for women are determined by prevalent gender concepts, socialization to gender, and the gendered nature of political institutions and bodies. Implicitly or explicitly, the message of the educational system, children's stories and songs, the media, advertisements, and so forth, reflects preference for the private sphere over the public sphere for women as distinct from men. The message is not necessarily one of exclusion, but rather of priorities. While entry into previously closed spheres of activity and professions, including public life, has been sanctioned by society in recent decades, traditional gender concepts nevertheless persist. Internalized by women as well as men, and enshrined in the continued patriarchal structure of Israeli society, these concepts are particularly resilient in the world of politics.

Beyond these relatively universal obstacles, however, there are two additional impediments to women's progress in the political sphere in Israel. These are 1) the deeply imbedded influence and political power of religion in the public life of the country; and 2) the militarization of society as a result of the prolonged armed conflict in which the country has been engaged virtually since its inception (Golan 1997; Izraeli 1997). While only approximately twenty per cent of the population would identify themselves as religiously observant, in fact, traditional religious values and customs exist to some degree in far larger percentages among both the Jewish and Arab (Moslem and Christian) populations. Thus traditional ideas of gender roles, particularly in the family, work against the idea of women even entering the public sphere and sustain the near exclusion of women from political life. Not only does Jewish tradition grant women lesser rights in the marital context, it also delineates fixed boundaries between the public and private/family spheres. While men are permitted — and expected — to operate in both spheres, women are

constrained to limit their activities to the private sphere, thereby blocking their access to politics. As mentioned above, in the pre-state days the leaders of the ultra-orthodox Jewish community opposed granting women the right to vote, on the grounds that it was improper both for them to develop political views of their own apart from their husbands' and to go to the polling station and stand there side by side with male voters (this demand was rejected by the non-religious majority and women were granted full political rights). However, even today in the ultra-orthodox Jewish parties, women are excluded from public office altogether, almost totally absent from the somewhat less strict National Religious Party, and similarly absent from the Arab political parties.⁷

Moreover, without separation of religion and state, and in view of the Israeli political system in which small parties tend to have inordinate power as the fulcrum for the creation of government coalitions, the religious political parties wield an influence well beyond the number of their electorate. This is reflected not only in the role of women but also in the legislation – or absence of legislation – in the Knesset with regard to matters of family law, abortion, surrogate motherhood, and other issues. The absence of a Bill of Rights and, to some degree, the absence of a written Constitution, are due to the determination of the religious establishment to maintain control over family law and related areas (e.g., Yishai 1997; El Or 1997; Radai 1991).

The militarization of Israeli society due to the prolonged armed conflict also has had a significant negative impact upon women's opportunities in the political sphere. Beyond the basic conception of the primacy of woman's role as "mother" in the national struggle, the prolonged conflict has rendered the army a central institution in the life of the society and made matters of military security uppermost in Israeli life, including and especially political life. Inasmuch as the vast majority of the country's Jewish citizens are drafted into the army at the age of eighteen, the military serves as an additional vehicle of gender socialization for much of the population (Sasson-Levi 2000). The army itself is a patriarchal institution par excellence, in which women remain secondary, almost totally excluded from combat roles, field commands and the higher ranks, serving less time and with little, if any, active reserve duty. The values promulgated are those of manhood, strength, power, hierarchy and domination. However, gender roles are not only reinforced by the military experience⁸ they are also projected beyond the military service. Professional military, upon retirement, are often "parachuted" into high public office. Many ex-

⁷ The only Arab woman member of Knesset to date came from Meretz, a Zionist leftist party composed and supported primarily by the Jewish population.

⁸ The continued service of men in yearly active reserve duty until the age of 45, as distinct from very brief reserve duty for women, further places male but not female role models (of civilian professions) before the young recruit, while the almost total male monopoly of combat and professional army positions reinforces already-held gender concepts.

high-ranking officers "skip" the laborious low- and middle-level party jobs and land directly in the party leadership, or even in ministerial or leading political positions, well on the road to Prime Ministership. This prioritization is due to the fact that their experience as military commanders is deemed to have provided them with the expertise most appreciated and considered necessary in Israeli society: expertise in matters of security. This high valuation of ex-military officers is reflected in the media as well as in society as a whole due to the preoccupation with security in a society engaged in prolonged armed conflict. Indeed this valuation begins even prior to military service. The Jewish male child from birth is perceived both by family and society as a future "protector;" one whose future role will include serving the country, possibly making the supreme sacrifice for his country, certainly playing an essential role for society. Thus the sense of entitlement, already part of male socialization, is endowed with an additional dimension, confirmed by society and facilitating the path of the Israeli male—indeed providing him with an invaluable advantage regarding public life in general and politics in particular.

Party politics

As already mentioned, due to its electoral system (voting for closed party candidate lists), the parties in Israel serve as THE "gatekeepers" of the parliamentary system. This is particularly paradoxical due to the ostensible and much-discussed decline in recent years in the parties' resources, their defective functioning as the "link" between the public and the administration, and the dramatic deterioration in their public image. With a few exceptions, Israeli women politicians find it very difficult, if not impossible, to reach the top of their parties' hierarchies and therefore to be elected to the Knesset. As mentioned above, women are totally outside the scene in the ultra-orthodox, the radical right and the Arab parties, and in the more "centrist" ones, they must continually fight to gain at least a "reserved" place on the party list. When the lists of candidates are made up before the elections, some of these parties "reserve" a minimal number of "realistic" places on their lists for women so as to guarantee that their parliamentary factions will include at least a small number of women MKs. From left to right and throughout the years, there have been very few women politicians who managed to achieve their place on the list without having to rely on this women's "quota" regulation. Admittedly, and contrary to theories in this regard which have described socialist or socio-democratic parties as more "welcoming" to women candidates, in recent years it appears that women are doing pretty much the same in this respect in Israel in the two largest parties - the socio-democratic Labour and the more traditionalist and conservative right-wing Likud party (7 and 6, respectively, in the first 30 places on the two parties' candidate lists for the 2003 elections).

In all Israeli parties, men politicians set the agenda and constitute a majority on the appointment committees and forums. Women's bargaining power and their ability to form coalitions within the

parties have proven weak due to the stiff competition between the individual women for the few places allocated to them, a zero-sum situation which has prevented them from joining forces or helping one another. As on the national political agenda, so too on the party level too, the "old boys network" is very strong and influential in the context of the candidates list construction. The primaries procedure adopted in the 1990s by certain parties, though altered in different ways after a while, has proved even more detrimental insofar as the prospects for women candidates are concerned, than the construction of the lists by the party apparatus. This is apparently because women candidates usually lack the material resources, public visibility and connections for competing on an equal footing with their male colleagues in the primaries. In the 14th Knesset, which was elected (in 1996) after the larger parties had implemented the primary procedure for the first time, the number of women members in the house dropped (to 7 immediately after the elections, later growing to 9) while in the previous Knesset, the 13th, elected in 1992, their number was considerably higher – 11 (see Table 1).

However, there have also been some positive developments on the party level. Thus the fact that the number of women MKs more than doubled from the Knesset elected in 1996 to the one elected in 1999 (from 7 to 15 and then 16, respectively) can be explained as the outcome of overall trend toward greater gender equality in Israeli society. However it may also be attributed to the adoption of the "minimal quota for women" policy by some of the parties. Thus, in the 1996 elections Labor decided to "reserve" 10% of its realistic places for the Knesset for women, and from 1999 onward, to have at least 2 women in each group of ten on its list. In 2002, this was increased to 3 of each ten (seemingly 30% of the entire list, yet the floor is also the ceiling because of the "double reservation" principle - if a woman is elected on another "ticket", e.g., places reserved for newcomers, for geographical sectors, etc., she is automatically counted also as part of the quota reserved for women). Indeed, of the 23 seats that Labor won in the Knesset elected in 1999, five (and later due to the resignation of a male MK, six) were occupied by women. In the Knesset elected in January 2003, the Labour faction shrank to only 19 seats, four of which are occupied by women. The Likud party decided before the 1996 elections to have at least one woman in each group of 10 and that if no woman reached the first ten on her own, then the woman with the largest number of votes would be "upgraded" to the 10th place. Amongst the 19 seats Likud had in the Knesset elected in 1999, women occupied three. On their list for the 2003 elections, women did even better than the minimal quota – 5 in the first 30 places on the candidate list and eventually 7 women elected (of the 38 seats won by the party in these elections). Proportionally, the highest representation for women was in the left-wing Meretz party in the Knesset elected in 1999 – 4 women MKs of 10 seats won by this party, above the quota set by the party of 30% of the seats "reserved" for women, with the party's executive deciding recently to reserve at least 4 seats for women in the first 12 places. Following the 2003 elections

in which the party suffered a major defeat, only 1 of the 6 seats the party won is presently occupied by a woman. Shinui, the centrist party, did not reserve places for women but had one woman among the 6 MKs elected in the 1999 Knesset and 3 of the 15 seats they won in their sweeping victory in 2003. The Zionist orthodox Mafdal party recently decided to reserve the 5th place on its list for a woman candidate and indeed following the elections, she is now a member of parliament. Hadash (the ex-Communist alliance) reserves 20% of the seats in all their organs for women; however, this rule doesn't apply to their list of candidates for the parliament and, as of the 2003 elections, none of its 3 seats is occupied by a woman.

This "minimal quota" policy is approved by some, yet heavily criticized by others. Its proponents point to the barriers discussed above and say that until these are removed, some artificial protecting measures should be maintained, as otherwise the chances that women will be elected will diminish. The critics, on the other hand, argue that this policy in practice dictates the ceiling, rather than the floor, for women's representation. Others maintain that it creates a feminine "Ghetto" that forces women to compete against each other for the few places allocated to them, instead of contending with all the other, mostly male, candidates for all the seats. A highly-estimated woman journalist has gone so far as to maintain, shortly after the 1992 elections, that "The reservation system stigmatizes women as a weak, dependent and helpless group. It may well enable more women to get elected but the presence of women MKs in 'reserved' seats has more of a decorative, not a political, value" (Shochat 1992). Yet, as described above, as of today this position has not been followed by Israel's major parties, and the women's movement in general continues to support the principle of affirmative action (euphemistically called "ensured representation").

Women's parties are no success story in Israeli politics. Four of them have competed over the years in several election campaigns with only one – the first – winning a parliamentary seat. The first women's party which had electoral success was fielded by a women's NGO named WIZO. The list competed in the first elections in 1949 and managed to get the woman who headed it - Rachel Kagan - into the Knesset. The party received 5,363 votes, with the threshold in this election being 4,346 votes. The organization, which is still operating, did not pursue a parliamentary course again. The second – this time unsuccessful – attempt was made 28 years later, in 1977, by a group of feminist activists who fielded a second women's list (NASHIM - NES). The third women's list (NEC) ran in the 1992 elections but also did not cross the then only 1% qualifying threshold: NES received only 7,000 votes when the threshold was 14,173 and NEC, even less - some 3,000 votes, with the threshold rising to 20,715 votes. The latest effort to secure the distinct representation of women in the Knesset was made in 1999 (YESH list). However, failure to mobilize the resources required to compete in the electoral arena forced its activists to

withdraw from the race, with the party's leader stating that contemporary Israel was still dominated by "former Generals and the Ultra-orthodox" (Yishai 2001).

There are many reasons for these failures, beginning with the supremacy of the security issue, through the religious and other sectors which prevent the feminist agenda from entering into Israel's public discourse and political agenda. Others merely dismiss the need for a women's party. The same woman journalist mentioned above reflected this position when she wrote: "There is something insulting in a women's party, much like in the women's lobby and the 'reservation' of seats for women on the parties' candidates' lists.... A women's party, like all other political organizations on a gender basis, is an outrageous phenomenon. Women who vote on one-issue, women, are basically declaring that they have no position on security, the economy or social matters [...] A women's party is another format of a return to the kitchen, and its very existence contradicts the feminist demand of women's integration in all realms of activity" (Shochat 1992). Such prevalent argumentation explains why feminist party politics have not succeeded in gaining momentum in Israel.

The fate of feminism per se has not been much better outside of the political establishment. Thus the extra-parliamentary feminist movement of the early 1970s, heavily influenced by the American one (Feldman 2000) never really made great strides. Yet a plethora of women's organizations of various sorts which incorporate feminism into their social and political agendas and strive for the promotion of women in the parliamentary arena have become part of the Israeli political scene and have been growing in visibility and scope of activity since the late 1980s. One such NGO with major influence in the realm of women's political participation and representation is the Israeli Women's Network (IWN). It was established in 1984 as an independent, non-partisan organization with the aim of promoting women's status through legislation, lobbying in the Knesset, research and information-gathering, and public consciousness-raising and education. One of the organization's most effective activities has been the political empowerment of women in the direction of the decision-making centers. It viewed women's role in electoral politics to be the key to the advancement of women's rights and therefore initiated a set of activities to promote women in the parties and other elected bodies both by lobbying the parties and by organizing and managing highly focused training courses, in which a number of future women MKs were involved.

By the late 1980s-early 1990s, the older, more conservative women's NGOs, such as NAAMAT, WIZO, and the orthodox women's organization Emunah, followed and shifted part of their resources and attention from giving services such as child-care or legal counseling for women, to the development of diversified training and empowerment programs for women from various

public sectors with political aspirations on either the community, the local or the national levels. The number of women who have participated in all these courses has already reached several thousand.

A new NGO for the political advancement of women - KIDUM NASHIM – KEN - was established in 2000. Its main goal is similar to that of the American women's organization Emily's list:⁹ to create a network of women who would provide women candidates of all parties with financial and other needed kinds of grass-roots support. The Israeli organization tries to promote legislation along the lines of the French and Scandinavian models so that special financial compensation will be given to parties with over 30% (or 40% depending on the specific model) women on their candidate lists. KEN also develops workshops which include political and image-building consultation and training for women candidates who compete for seats on the national and the municipal level. This sort of consciousness- raising is performed today by many other, smaller and at present less well-known Israeli women' s NGOs (e.g., NISAN), as well as the numerous women's internet sites.

As mentioned above, the growing political drive and participation of Israeli women is still not significantly reflected on the parliamentary level (see below). However, it is very strongly felt on the grassroots level. Women have been spearheading the Israeli peace movement for almost a decade and their voice is strongly heard on the extra-parliamentary political right as well ("Women in Green"). Environmental as well as animal-rights groups, foreign workers' hotlines and medical aid NGOs are mainly composed of women. In these areas, where military expertise is not a valuable asset, vast financial resources are not needed, personal connections are of minor importance, and post-materialist and post-industrial values are stronger than traditionalist ones, women can much more easily reach the forefront of activity and leadership positions. Yet, there is no doubt that the real power for setting the national agenda still rests within the formal political establishment and as long as women are not equally represented there, their ability to shape this agenda will remain minor. We shall now examine the situation of women at the Israeli political level.

Parliamentary representation

The parliamentary representation of women in Israel today is far from egalitarian in terms of numbers, let alone in the allocation of roles on parliamentary committees and in the cabinet. According to the latest International Parliaments Union (IPU) classification, Israel is in 54th place among the 124 countries included on its table of global parliamentary representation of women.

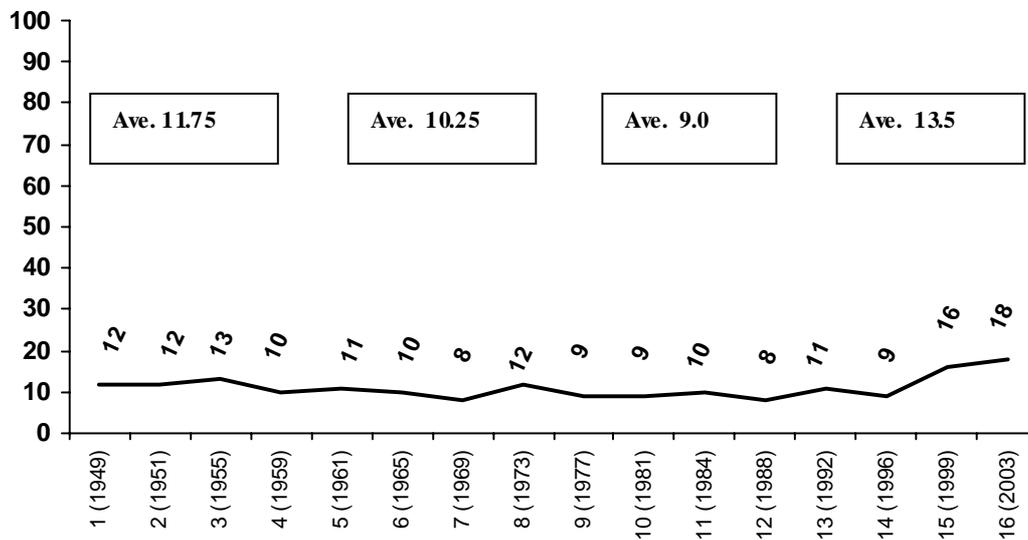
⁹ See: www.emilyslist.org

At first glance, there seems to be fairly low representation of women in the Knesset, ranging from 8 women MKs (6.6%) in the 7th Knesset and 18 (15%) in the 16th Knesset (see Table 1).¹⁰ Viewing this issue from a historical perspective, however, reveals a prolonged decline in the early years and later, some improvement in recent years (See Figure 1). Thus, in the first to the fourth Knesset, the average number of women MKs was 11.75, for the fifth to the eighth - 10.25 per Knesset, in the ninth to the twelfth - an average of 9.0 and in the thirteenth to the sixteenth Knesset, a significant increase to an average of 13.5 women representatives per Knesset.

Table 1: Women's representation in the Knesset 1948-2003

| Knesset | No. Of Women MKs | % (out of 120) of Women MKs |
|----------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 (1949) | 12 | 9.2 |
| 2 (1951) | 12 | 10.0 |
| 3 (1955) | 13 | 10.0 |
| 4 (1959) | 10 | 8.3 |
| 5 (1961) | 11 | 8.3 |
| 6 (1965) | 10 | 7.5 |
| 7 (1969) | 8 | 6.6 |
| 8 (1973) | 12 | 8.3 |
| 9 (1977) | 9 | 7.5 |
| 10 (1981) | 9 | 7.5 |
| 11 (1984) | 10 | 8.3 |
| 12 (1988) | 8 | 6.6 |
| 13 (1992) | 11 | 9.2 |
| 14 (1996) | 9 | 7.5 |
| 15 (1999) | 16 | 13.3 |
| 16 (2003) | 18 | 15.0 |

¹⁰ These figures as well as those in the table represent all women who served as MKs in each Knesset from the beginning to the end of its term. However some did not serve a full term so the actual number of women serving together was often lower.

Figure 1: Women MKs (%) 1948-2003

A comparison of the number of women representatives in the Knesset throughout the years (1949-2003) according to their party affiliation – Labour and Likud - reveals a very significant difference between these two parties – 33 women MKs from Labour and 15 from Likud. Yet, as mentioned above, there was no significant difference in the number of women on these parties' lists for the 2003 elections. Furthermore, the electoral victory of Likud (with 38 seats in the present Knesset) and the defeat of Labour (with only 19 seats) was also reflected in the number of their women parliamentarians – 7 for Likud and only 3 for Labour. This suggests that while Likud has progressed in this respect (with 18.4% women in its parliamentary faction), Labour (with only 15.7%) has not shown a proportional improvement in this regard. This, in turn, can be explained by the growing electoral appeal of Likud, bringing in its wake a growing number of seats to be divided amongst its candidates and greater "generosity" towards women, as opposed to the shrinking number of seats available for distribution to Labour representatives which has been accompanied by a fierce struggle over each seat. When the internal struggle gets tougher, women always seem to be the losers.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that being a top woman politician does not guarantee a change in image: a study of the television election campaign in 1996 indicated that the changes which took place in Israeli society in terms of the improvement of women's status in other spheres were not reflected in the campaign. In fact, contrary to expectations, persistent biases, typical of traditional gender representations (which for women include the stereotypes of mother, housewife and sex object as well as characteristics like compassion, warmth, honesty, nurturance, passivity and emotionality) prevailed in the media (Lemish and Tidhar 1999).

Legislation

As we have pointed out, the growth of women's consciousness, reflected in the activities of women's organizations in the late 1980s and 1990s, was not echoed at that time in the numbers of women selected for realistic places on the parties' lists. A significant change did occur with regard to the nature of the women elected to the 13th Knesset in 1992, which has reflected upon the agenda of the Knesset. New women MKs were almost all feminists who came with experience in the Israel Women's Network or related feminist activities. These women, plus one continuing woman MK who already defined herself as a feminist, viewed themselves as representing women's rights with a definite feminist agenda. This led to a sea change in legislation proposed, if not in laws actually passed. We shall exemplify this observation by comparing legislation related to women's issues beginning in the 12th Knesset elected in 1988, and through the 14th Knesset.¹¹

The main function of the Knesset is, of course, to legislate. The initiative for a bill can come from the government, from individual MKs (private Members' bills) or from Knesset committees. A bill can be a totally new law, or can be a proposal to amend or cancel an existing law. Every reading of a bill is adopted or rejected in a vote by a majority of the MKs who are present at the plenary meeting in which it is read. During the 4-year term of the 12th Knesset (1988-1992), 37 legislative proposals related to gender issues; in the 13th Knesset (mid-1992 to spring 1996), there were no less than 104 such proposals—close to triple the number.¹² In addition, women MKs raised questions of gender on 11 non-gender-related bills—something that was not evident in previous Knessets. In the 14th Knesset (1996-1999), to which most of the same women were reelected, the number of gender-related proposals declined to 51 (and 6 questions related to general bills were raised). Allowing for the fact that the 14th Knesset sat for only three years, the total still represents a significant drop in proposed legislation regarding women. One might explain the decline by suggesting that the women MKs of the 13th Knesset accomplished much of their feminist agenda, and in the next Knesset settled down to more routine legislative activity. Nonetheless, the number of gender-related bills in the 14th Knesset significantly exceeded the number proposed in the 1988 (12th) Knesset (only 37 in its 4-year term).

While the large increase in the number of gender-related proposals in the 13th Knesset may be attributed to a general rise in gender awareness in the country, women MKs surely contributed more than their proportional share to this increase - roughly two-thirds (70) of the 104 gender-related bills were in fact proposed by women.¹³ All of these were proposed by new women

¹¹ The 15th Knesset elected in 1999 was still in session when this chapter was prepared.

¹² Proposals include amendments and changes to laws as well as new laws.

¹³ Some of the proposals were initiated by the government rather than private proposals by MKs.

members in addition to the one feminist who had been similarly active in the previous Knesset. In all three Knessets, men also joined as initiators of the legislation, often sought by the women for tactical reasons; men alone or the government submitted one-third of the proposals in the 12th and 13th Knessets, and close to half in the 14th Knesset.

The picture, however, is quite different when examining legislation that was actually passed by the Knesset. Literally thousands of private members' bills are proposed (1,491 in the 12th Knesset; 3,607 in the 13th Knesset; 2,685 in the 14th – which indicates a significant rise in proposals altogether) but only a fraction are passed into law. Only 7 gender-related bills (of the 37 proposed) were passed by the 12th Knesset (of which two were submitted by men alone). In the 13th Knesset (1992-1996), only 19 of the 104 proposed gender-related bills actually passed into law; of these, 9 were proposed by women. The rate of passage of such bills was better in the 14th Knesset: 14 of 51 proposals in the three-year period of the Knesset passed into law (of which half were proposed by women). On the whole, in view of the large numbers of proposed bills, the record of passage for gender-related bills may be considered high even if in absolute terms the success rate of gender-related legislation was not.

Table 2: Gender related legislation (1988- 1999)

| | 12th Knesset (1988-1992) | 13th Knesset (1992-1996) | 14th Knesset (1996-1999) |
|---|--|--|--|
| Total number of private bill proposals | 1,491 | 3,607 | 2,685 |
| Number of gender related proposals | 37 | 104 | 51 |
| Number of gender related proposals made by women MKs | 23 | 70 | 28 |
| Number of passed proposals | 7 | 19 | 14 |
| Number of passed proposals made by women MKs | 2 | 9 | 7 |

In keeping with the literature, the vast majority of gender-related bills were proposed by left-wing MKs, male and female. Since there were always more women MKs from the left and the center than from the right, it is not surprising that the majority of the proposed legislation also came from left-wing and, to a lesser degree, centrist women. Albeit in smaller numbers, right-wing women MKs also saw themselves as representing women, proposing gender-related legislation alone or with a male party colleague. More significantly, they crossed party lines to join with left and

centrist women with regard to at least 12 gender-related proposals in the 13th Knesset. In the shorter 14th Knesset, this occurred 6 times.

In terms of content, some quite controversial, often path-breaking, legislation was proposed by women and even passed. Among the more striking of these was the radical bill for the prevention of sexual harassment and a long-sought bill relating to women's service in the military (opening up combat positions).¹⁴ Bills for affirmative action (in the civil service; in state-owned company directorates; in public company directorates) proposed by men also passed. Two particularly important achievements were the creation of a Knesset Committee on the Advancement of the Status of Women as a statutory committee of the Knesset as well as the creation of the Administration for the Advancement of the Status of Women in the Prime Minister's Office. In contrast, repeatedly proposed (by women) bills for the liberalization of the abortion law continued to fail (in the 12th and 13th Knessets -- not raised in the 14th).

On the whole, it can be said that by the 1990s, women Knesset members did see themselves as representing women's interests and did take upon themselves legislative tasks to further women's rights, even to the point of cooperating with political adversaries from rival parties on some occasions. Whether as a result of this activity or of a more general change in the consciousness of elected officials in Israel, significantly more gender-related legislation was passed, particularly by the 13th Knesset (1992-1996), than by earlier Knessets, proposed by men as well as by women, together or separately. And almost the same number of bills were passed by the 14th Knesset (1996-1999) even though its term was one year shorter. This may indicate a trend, which appears to be independent of left or right-wing majorities in the Knesset (since the 13th Knesset had a left-wing majority and the 14th had a right-wing majority, though in both cases the majorities were not large).¹⁵

Parliamentary Committee membership

Table 3 clearly indicates that even when already elected, women politicians are expected to deal either with women's issues or with traditional feminine concerns such as welfare and education. They are rarely included on the major parliamentary committees, those dealing with "high politics", such as foreign affairs and security or finance. A closer look at the numbers suggests

¹⁴ Proposed in the 14th Knesset but passed only in the 15th which was still in session when this chapter was prepared.

¹⁵ The sharp decline in left-wing representation resulting from the January 2003 elections left outside the Knesset four of the most active feminist legislators (Yael Dayan of Labor, Naomi Chazan and Anat Maor of Meretz, and Tamar Gozansky of Hadash (the ex-Communists). While an unprecedented 18 women were elected to the new Knesset, mainly as part of the massive right-center victory, most of them are new and their feminist credentials are not certain.

that even in recent years, there has been no improvement in the representation of women on this level. Their absence from these committees cannot possibly be explained by their numbers or skills (on the average, the educational level of women MKs is higher than that of men) but by the refusal of their male colleagues to relinquish these more prestigious committees and let women step in. This situation prevents women's voices and concerns from being heard in forums which deal with the core issues of national politics.

Table 3: Membership of women MKs on specific parliamentary committees, 1948-2002

| Knesset | Finance Committee | | Foreign Affairs and Defense | | Labor, Welfare and Health | | Education and Culture | | Advancement of the Status of Women | |
|---------|-------------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|------------------------------------|------------|
| | no. of women | % of women | no. of women | % of women | no. of women | % of women | no. of women | % of women | no. of women | % of women |
| 1 | -- | -- | 1 | 6.5 | 3 | 13.0 | 5 | 33.0 | | |
| 2 | -- | -- | 1 | 6.0 | 2 | 20.0 | 5 | 33.0 | | |
| 3 | -- | -- | - | - | 2 | 13.0 | 7 | 46.0 | | |
| 4 | -- | -- | 1 | 5.0 | 3 | 16.0 | 3 | 16.0 | | |
| 5 | -- | -- | 1 | 5.0 | 3 | 16.0 | 4 | 21.0 | | |
| 6 | -- | -- | - | - | 2 | 5.0 | 5 | 26.0 | | |
| 7 | -- | -- | - | - | 2 | 10.5 | 3 | 16.0 | | |
| 8 | -- | -- | - | - | 2 | 11.7 | 3 | 17.6 | | |
| 9 | -- | -- | - | - | 4 | 26.6 | 4 | 26.6 | | |
| 10 | -- | -- | 1 | 4.7 | 4 | 26.6 | 1 | 6.6 | | |
| 11 | 1 | 4.0 | 1 | 4.2 | 5 | 38.4 | 1 | 6.6 | | |
| 12 | 2 | 9.0 | 2 | 7.4 | 3 | 15.0 | - | - | | |
| 13 | -- | -- | 3 | 17.6 | 4 | 26.6 | 3 | 20.0 | 8 | 46 |
| 14 | -- | -- | - | - | 3 | 21.0 | 2 | 13.0 | 7 | 50 |
| 15 | 1 | 5.0 | 1 | 5.5 | 2 | 15.0 | 3 | 20.0 | 6 | 40 |

Cabinet membership

The situation is even grimmer regarding the presence of Israeli women in the cabinet (memshala). With only 3 women among 32 ministers in the last cabinet, Israel was rated 15th by the Political Data Yearbook of 2001 (Table 1, p. 887), only 7 places from the bottom of the list of 32 Western liberal democracies.¹⁶

All in all, only 9 women have served as cabinet ministers in the 54 years of Israeli statehood. Needless to say, none of them was Minister of Defense or Finance, the two main portfolios in the Israeli administration. In most cases, women ministers were given either secondary portfolios

¹⁶ At the time of the writing of this paper, immediately after the 2003 elections, the composition of the new government, including the number of women ministers, is still unknown.

(environment, communication, regional cooperation and the like) or again - ministries dealing with classic feminine issues (i.e., health, education).¹⁷

Between 1948 and 2002, there have been 29 government cabinets (see Table 4). Considering that the only woman minister serving from the first to the 16th government was actually the same woman – Golda Meir – first as Minister of Labour and Social Security, then as Foreign Minister, and finally as Prime Minister, and she never showed any particular interest in women's issues, let alone held a feminist agenda, the picture is even more problematic. It is important to note that in her 3 terms as Prime Minister Meir did not appoint even one woman to her cabinet. In fact, she clashed more than once with Shulamit Aloni, then a young and promising woman MK from her own party – Mapai (today – Labour), exhibiting a classical "queen bee" mode of conduct.

Table 4: Women's membership in the Israeli cabinet (1948-2002)

| Government (dates) | PM Party | No. of Women Ministers | % of women Ministers | Total number of Ministers |
|--------------------|----------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Provisional | Labour | -- | -- | 16 |
| 1 | Labour | 1 | 5.8 | 17 |
| 2 | Labour | 1 | 6.2 | 16 |
| 3 | Labour | 1 | 5.5 | 18 |
| 4 | Labour | 1 | 5.2 | 19 |
| 5 | Labour | 1 | 5.5 | 18 |
| 6 | Labour | 1 | 5.8 | 17 |
| 7 | Labour | 1 | 5.5 | 18 |
| 8 | Labour | 1 | 5.5 | 18 |
| 9 | Labour | 1 | 5.5 | 18 |
| 10 | Labour | -- | -- | 19 |
| 11 | Labour | 1 | 5.0 | 20 |
| 12 | Labour | 1 | 5.0 | 20 |
| 13 | Labour | -- | -- | 26 |
| 14 | Labour | 1 (PM) | 4.1 | 24 |
| 15 | Labour | 1 (PM) | 3.7 | 27 |
| 16 | Labour | 1 (PM) | 4.3 | 23 |
| 17 | Labour | 1 | 4.3 | 23 |
| 18 | Likud | -- | -- | 20 |
| 19 | Likud | 1 | 4.1 | 24 |
| 20 | Likud | 1 | 4.3 | 23 |
| 21 | Labour | -- | -- | 28 |
| 22 | Likud | 1 | 3.5 | 28 |
| 23 | Likud | -- | -- | 28 |
| 24 | Likud | -- | -- | 24 |
| 25 | Labour | 2 | 7.4 | 27 |
| 26 | Labour | 2 | 8.6 | 23 |
| 27 | Likud | 1 | 4.0 | 25 |
| 28 | Labour | 2 | 8.0 | 25 |
| 29 | Likud | 3 | 9.4 | 32 |

¹⁷ It should be kept in mind that because of the nation's specific situation, the Foreign Ministry, at the head of which Golda Meir stood for many years, was traditionally much weaker and less influential as far as decision-making was concerned than the Ministries of Defense and Finance.

Once again, as in the case of representation on the party's candidate list, here too the theory regarding the greater openness of social democratic parties to women's equality seems no longer to be applicable to the Israeli Labour-Likud dichotomy, since the largest number of women ministers is found in the 29th, Likud-led, government.

Summary and conclusions

Admittedly, the formal Israeli political establishment has done but little to remove the barriers to women's participation and advancement in the political world. As we have seen, some of the parties recently introduced various kinds of affirmative action regulations; thus far, with limited success in terms of numbers of women in the Knesset. To compensate for this, women's organizations have been very active, organizing courses for women as well as lobbying the parties and conducting public campaigns for the placement of women in realistic positions on the party lists. In parallel some have conducted campaigns urging women to vote for women so as to convince the parties that a "women's vote" exists and represents an incentive for placing women high on their lists. Thus far, the outcomes of these efforts have also been rather limited. Furthermore, the powerful religious institutions and parties remain virtually unchanged.

These obvious defects notwithstanding, there has been significant change and progress in Israel over the last two decades. Awareness of the absence of gender equality has taken root in many circles in Israeli society; new areas of work have opened to women and more women have entered the work force and even public life. The army has begun to permit women to volunteer for certain combat roles and the nature of women's service is beginning to change. This change itself is the result of feminist parliamentary activity that has, additionally, produced significant new legislation. Along with the fact that important legal decisions have been rendered, there does seem to be some light at the end of the tunnel. Regarding Israeli society as a whole, there are clear trends in a positive direction. The reasons for these trends are numerous and varied, including the influx of outside influences and ideas through the media and through globalization in general; the efforts of the women's movements in Israel itself; the development of participatory democracy and civil society in the country; the demands of modern technology; the expansion of higher education of women (particularly in the Arab sector). It is difficult to believe that all these will not eventually result in a corresponding change in parliamentary representation as well.

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