

Women in Israel

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(March 2010)

Introduction

The status of women in [Israel](#) began to take shape in context of the ideology of the [Zionist](#) movement and the [First Aliyah](#) to Israel in 1882. These gave rise to two fascinating and contradictory trends: on one hand, research indicates that Zionism, as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, was essentially a masculine liberation movement. On the other hand, the harsh conditions of the pioneers and the need to settle the land led to *prima facie* equality with regard to labor and security, and to the establishment of women's organizations during the earliest stages of the [Yishuv](#). One of the main streams in Zionism championed the return to national independence, to Jewish defense forces, to conquest through labor, conquest of the soil, physical agricultural work, and the native Israeli (Sabra) role model. . These all required attributes of physical strength, physical labor, the military, heroism in war, independence, and control. Yet, the image of the state of the Jews in exile was of feminine attributes, interpreted as weakness: spiritual power, the capacity to give, non-physical labor, culture and literature, dependence (on the gentile nations), and domestication (as well as the obligation to be confined in ghettos). A fascinating illustration of these attributes can be seen in Michael Glozman's recent study.[\[1\]](#)

He analyzes [Herzl's](#) *Altneuland* as a gender and sexual utopia that sees the objective of Zionism as transforming the "emaciated Jewish youth" into a "steel-cast man"; he discusses the works of [Bialik](#), who emphasizes that the Kishinev pogrom represents "powerlessness – the most shameful illness of all," and he brings [Yosef Haim Brenner's](#) impressions of "this nation's feminine virtues." The greatest authors and poets of early Zionism – Herzl, Bialik, and Brenner – contributed to the shaping of the Jewish and Zionist national image as explicitly masculine images, muscle-bound and strong. This ideology heightened the estrangement between the sexes. It is likely that in the historical context of early Zionism there was no escaping this paradigm, whether intrinsically or for the purpose of inspiring Jews to undertake the difficult, pioneering step of immigrating to Israel. Nevertheless, the feminist literature has revealed the price that women paid for this ideology.[\[2\]](#)

On the other hand, the reality of the pioneer era demanded that women be included in the hard work of paving roads, agriculture and construction as well as their integration in defense organizations such as "[Hashomer](#)" and "[Hahagana](#)." It thus seems that there was actually equality between the sexes during the [Yishuv](#) period. However,

recent studies reveal that this was not the case: First, the women were required to integrate into the work and defense forces based on the “assimilation” model and not the “adaptation” model; that is, the women were expected to work and act like men instead of adapting society to integrating work and family. Second, already in the pioneer and Yishuv era, women groups fought against their under-representation within the ranks of the leadership, argued that households should be registered under the names of both spouses and not just the husband, and later complained that their part in the historical narrative was ignored. Three notable women's groups grew in this era: Na'amat, as part of the Histadrut General Labor Federation; the Israeli branch of [WIZO, the Women's International Zionist Organization](#); and Emunah, the organization for religious women. These women's organizations also established and have continued to shoulder the monumental project of launching and running nursery schools, a project that forms an important basis for the integration of work and motherhood.

The Status of Women Upon the Establishment of the State

The [Declaration of Independence](#) from May 14, 1948 unequivocally calls for all citizens to be treated equally and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, or sex. Since the establishment of the state, however, this egalitarian outlook has not been fully realized. At the outset, compromises were made with regard to the status of women, in large measure to appease the [Orthodox](#) politicians whose support was needed to form a coalition government. Thus, the Women's Equal Rights Law of 1951 does not refer to equality of the sexes. More significantly, the Rabbinical Courts' Jurisdiction (Marriage and Divorce) Law of 1953 placed the authority for marriage and divorce in Israel in the hands of the Orthodox religious establishment, depriving men and women of the right to choose between religious and civil marriage. Women were further disadvantaged by certain aspects of Jewish law, especially relating to divorce (e.g., the need to obtain the husband's permission – a “[get](#)” – before being allowed to remarry).

The advancement of women during the first decades of the state was inhibited because women were not fully integrated into the workforce and most were expected to return to traditional roles in the home following the [War of Independence](#). Furthermore, Israel's first prime minister, [David Ben-Gurion](#), emphasized the importance of increasing the Jewish population in Israel to strengthen the state, which was greatly outnumbered by its enemies, and therefore encouraged women to “be fruitful and multiply” and focus on their roles as mothers. Despite the value placed on women's role in addressing Israel's demographic challenge, the literature and culture of that time were mostly militaristic, dealing primarily with the War of Independence and the heroism of men during the war.

The Beginnings of Feminism in Israel: the 1970s

While women's organizations were active from the first years of the [Yishuv](#), feminism as a theoretical and social stream began only in the 1970s. [Shulamit Aloni](#) is considered the founder of feminism in Israel because of her contribution to feminist thought,^[3] her founding of the Ratz party in 1973 -- the first party to champion the causes of human and civil rights and the advancement of women -- and her inclusion of Marcia Freedman, who promoted activism in Israel based on her experience in the feminist movement in the [United States](#), in the Ratz Party's Knesset list.

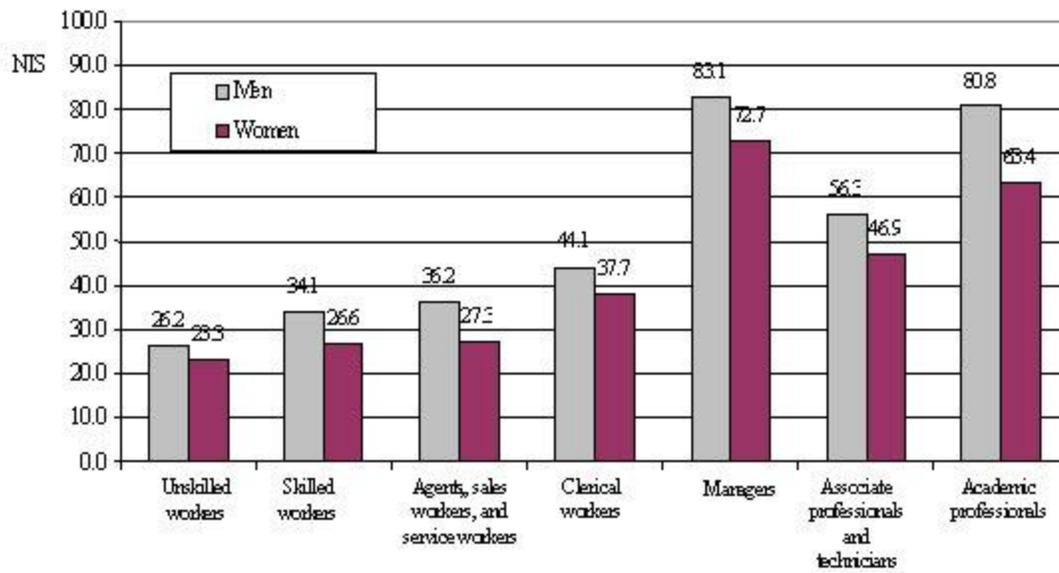
Another important step in the struggle for the advancement of women in Israel came a decade later, when emphasis was placed in the advancement of women in the workplace and their empowerment. Dafna Izraeli and other scholars^[4] emphasized in the 1980s, following the theories proposed by Virginia Woolf in 1920s [England](#), ^[5] that without the integration of women into the workforce and management, without economic independence and participation in the control over resources and budgets, women would never be able to attain their independence and sovereignty. Another decade later, the next level was attained with the establishment of the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women (1992), whose contribution has been of the utmost significance.

The Status of Women in Israel's Labor

One of the most important litmus tests of the status of women in any country is the degree of equality in the labor market. In [Israel](#), approximately 50% of women participate in the workforce. This compares favorably internationally, as well as with men in Israel (62% of who are in the workforce). Nevertheless, severe unemployment exists among [Israeli Arab](#) women (only 22% of Arab women work), women residing in peripheral regions, and middle-aged women (aged 45-64).

Once women enter the labor force, they face a large salary gap compared with their male coworkers. The average gap per hour of work in 2008 was 19%, and due to the fact that men work more hours per month, the actual salary discrepancies are approximately 25% in the public sector and 35% in the private sector.

Chart 1: Gross Income Per Work Hour for Employee, by Sex



Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007 Report, Chart 2

This discrepancy, which is not unique to Israel, provokes outrage among women in Israel and around the world who are offended by the fact that they may have equal education and skills, and devote as much energy to their job as their male counterparts, and still are compensated in a discriminatory manner.

Many studies have been conducted with regard to the gender pay gap and found the following causes:[\[6\]](#)

- Occupational segregation between female and male workers
- Discrimination against women in the labor market and the workplace
- Unequal distribution of family responsibility
- Gender gap in educational levels between women and men
- Gender gap in work experience between women and men
- The trade unions push wages up in protected segments that mainly include male employees
- State privatization of the labor market widens salary gaps
- Employers pay unfair salaries
- Part-time work primarily impacts female employees, and especially low wage earners.
- Perceptions of women as second-income earners: women are expected to work for "pin money" or "extras"
- Women's fear and lack of capacity for salary negotiations

For several decades, scholars attributed the gender pay gap to the above causes; however, Grimshaw & Rubery (2007) argue that "most recent [UK](#) studies show that gender differences in human capital or personal characteristics (such as age, education and work experience) explain a shrinking portion of the overall gender pay gap. The closing of the gender gap in education has not done more to reduce the gender pay gap. This is also indicated by international evidence" (2007, p. vii). Though the advancement of women in higher education is very important, without cultural change, the gender salary gap remains a problem.

These conclusions apply to [Israel](#) as well.

Women in Israel also disproportionately suffer from Israel's low minimum wage, approximately 3,500 NIS (\$935) per month, or 20 NIS (\$5.34) per hour, because they constitute the majority of minimum-wage earners (70%). Additionally, even low wages that exceed the minimum do not allow for a dignified existence. 50% of working women in Israel do not even reach the threshold for paying income taxes, and 46% of those living under the poverty line are working women and [migrants](#).

The dramatic weakening of Israel's organized labor movement beginning in the late 1990s also had a negative impact on women. While 90% of the labor force was once organized through the [Histadrut General Labor Federation](#), today only 20% of Israel's workforce is organized. A report by the Mahut Center found that the salaries, dignity, and purchasing power of women have been greatly harmed by this trend, because more women belong to the "secondary work market," and their jobs are viewed as a "second job" in the society and family.^[7]

Another litmus test for determining equality in the workplace is the degree to which women attain middle and senior management positions. The data regarding [Israel](#) are that women advance to middle management positions, of which they constitute 20-30%, whereas their advancement to senior management positions is blocked by a "glass ceiling," and they constitute only about 2% of senior management, despite their abilities and experience. This is manifested in management positions in finance, industry, and the military. In education, since 2000, women have constituted approximately 50% of all teaching positions in higher education and roughly 40% of teaching faculties at the entry level (lecturers), but women hold only 10% of the highest academic positions (full professors), and this percentage has only marginally increased over the past 20 years. In 2005, a woman was chosen for the first time as the president of an Israeli university, [Ben-Gurion University](#).

Another litmus in Israel test for determining equality in the work market is the strong role of military service in employment. Men get jobs often because of their military connections, so women are at a competitive disadvantage in the labor market.

One area in which women's rights are protected surrounds pregnancy and birth. In [Israel](#), maternity leave is 14 weeks, based on the recommendation of international standards. Every woman who gives birth in Israel, even if she is not a resident of Israel, receives a birth grant as well as hospitalization costs. Women who had been working prior to giving birth receive their full salary during maternity leave. The state also grants a child allowance to parents for each child. In this respect, the situation in Israel is based on the [West European](#) social security practice. There is also legislation that forbids the firing of women during pregnancy and after childbirth, although many employers contravene this, and many women are harmed or are forced to petition labor courts. In addition, the feminist movement has contributed to changing the attitude toward women as "secondary breadwinners," and to normalizing the idea of two careers for the two spouses. Therefore, more and more fathers are gradually sharing in the roles of fatherhood and the home.

Status of Women in Israeli Politics

The struggle of women for equality greatly emphasizes the inclusion of women at all levels of decision-making. As such, the struggle to integrate women into senior political positions is central, since the state's public policies are shaped in the government, parliament, and municipal authorities. Therefore, feminists focused on increasing the number of women in national politics and in local governments. Moreover, as soon as women begin to serve in the [Knesset](#), their contributions to Knesset activities is greater than that of their male colleagues.^[8] Another important advantage that the participation of women in government has for the advancement of equality is the educational and public relations value of having women as normative role models for other women, who may then identify with and learn from women in leadership positions and follow in their footsteps.

In light of the struggle over this issue in many democracies, the unequivocal conclusion is that the most effective tool for increasing in the number of women in parliaments is the affirmative action policy. It has been found that due to traditional perceptions, stereotypes, lack of sufficient social networking, and lack of sufficient financial means to run for office, women have a little chance of increasing their representation in the upper political echelons without active intervention..

Thus, in many countries the principle of affirmative action has been instituted on behalf of women in politics. In most European countries this is accomplished through political parties, and in a few countries (such as [Argentina](#) and [France](#)) this is accomplished by state law.

In Israel, the representation of women in the [Knesset](#), the government, and municipal authorities is very low in comparison with other democracies, and advancement has been slow since the founding of the state. During the first Knesset terms, representation of women was approximately 9%, and later it dropped to 7%. Although it passed the 10% barrier in 2000, the maximum representation of female members in the Knesset was 18%.

Israel is ranked 100th place among the nations of the world, lagging far behind not only [European](#) countries (in Scandinavia, women constitute nearly 38% of members of parliament), but also a large proportion of [South American](#), [Asian](#), and [African](#) nations.

The number of women in government is even lower. In 2009, only two out of thirty ministers are women. The maximum number of women to serve in ministerial positions since the founding of the state was three. Additionally, very few women have attained the senior ministries of defense, foreign affairs, and education. Nevertheless, in the 1970s Israel had a woman prime minister, [Golda Meir](#). The fact that Israel had one of the first female heads of state who was a role model and inspiration as well as one of the most important political figures in Israel's history- is very important, but she represented an exception and also did not advance a feminist agenda as prime minister.

On the municipal level, there are three woman mayors out of 260 municipalities and regional councils, whereas there are countries in which they represent 20-25% of mayors and heads of districts.

One effort to redress the dearth of women in Israeli politics implemented by the [political parties](#) has been to reserve a certain percentage of places on the party list for female candidates.^[9] [Meretz](#) resolved that women would make up 40% of the first ten on its list (although when the party is small, the actual percentage comes out lower); in the Labor Party representation is 20%, in the [Likud](#) 10%, and in the former [National Religious Party](#) the seventh spot was reserved for a woman. Several parties categorically oppose female representation: the Ultra-Orthodox parties and the Islamic Balad Party (secular-Arab parties do include women in their lists). On the other hand, in the eighteenth Knesset, the "Israel Our Home" Party placed five women in the Knesset out of a total of fifteen mandates (33%), giving it the second highest representation of women in the Knesset since the founding of the state. Four of ten Meretz MKs were women (1999-2003), including one Arab woman. In the present Knesset, however, which began its term in 2009, Meretz, the party that established feminism, does not have a single woman in the Knesset.

Since the advancement of women representation through the political parties did not succeed, a [Knesset](#) bill in the 1990s' was aimed at ensuring a mandatory representation of 30% on the Knesset list of each party. The Knesset did not pass the bill.. Later, a law was proposed to advance the representation of women in each party via state budget subsidies during elections. The Knesset also rejected this bill, and the progress has been very slow.

Another way to advance women in politics is by empowering and training women for politics.^[10] Most women's organizations hold workshops and encourage women to take leadership positions, emphasizing their training in the areas of career planning and goal setting, self-confidence and self-image, assertiveness, effective and attractive appearance, dealing with the media and public relations, fundraising, and deployment of marketing.

While falling short of feminist objectives, some significant achievements have also been recorded in the political sphere. For example, during 2006-2009, Israel had a female Foreign Minister, Speaker of the Knesset and Supreme Court justice – at one time!

Women in Judaism

There are various interpretations with regard to the status of women in [Judaism](#). Some maintain that it is reasonable to interpret the [Book of Genesis](#) as establishing the equal status of women when it states: "God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). This interpretation claims that the statement "male and female He created them" grants full equality between men and women in terms of value, rights, abilities, and contributions. Additionally, at the end of the creation narrative, the equivalence of men and women is reiterated: "Male and female He created them – and He blessed them and called them Man on the day He created them" (Gen. 5:2). On the other hand, some maintain otherwise based on the verse: "And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman – and He brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This one at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman (*ishah*) for she was taken from man (*ish*)'" (Gen. 2:22-23). This interpretation claims that woman is "only" a rib of man, and the superiority of man is thereby legitimized: "and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). Similarly, we find expressions of esteem and empowerment such as the passage

about the “woman of valor” (Prov. 31:10-31) and “A woman of valor who can find?” and “all the glory of the royal princess is within” (Ps. 45:14) alongside expressions that minimize her stature such as “Blessed is He Who did not make me a woman” (*b. Mehnahot* 43b) and “A woman is unfit to give testimony” (*b. Bava Kama* 88a).

Thus, Jewish sources are multi-faceted when it comes to the status of women, and it is up to subsequent generations to interpret them. [Orthodox](#) women in Israel are engaged in this. In 1998, a group of activists and scholars, men and women, founded the “Kolech” organization to highlight and strengthen the status, position, and role of women on the basis of their interpretation of the sources. They accomplish this by publishing studies and a newsletter and by holding seminars, and they have influenced the religious-cultural discourse in Israel. Another group comprises religious and secular women, scholars and writers, who are continuing the efforts of their colleagues in the United States to shed light and turn the spotlight onto the female characters of the Jewish Bible. ^[11]

The Struggle Against Religious Coercion

The [State of Israel](#) is unique in three aspects: First, it existed in the past, the Jews were exiled from it, and it was reestablished after more than 2,000 years of exile. Second, until the third millennium, and despite the establishment of the State of Israel, the majority of the Jewish people lived in the [Diaspora](#) and, even today, only about half of the world’s Jews live in Israel. Third, due to this unique historical development, there is a very close link between Jewish nationality and the Jewish religion, and this helped shape the face of the state. Therefore, even though Israel cultivated and adopted democratic rule, it is simultaneously a Jewish state, and the relationship between religion and state is blurred without the strict separation codified in the United States. This fact impacts the character and legislation of Israel, especially with regard to the relationship between religious and secularist Jews. In addition, there is a struggle over pluralism within [Judaism](#): Israel recognizes the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox streams of Judaism, while the Reform and Conservative movements, which constitute the majority of American Jewry, for example, are forced to fight for recognition. Against this background, disputes on matters of religion and state have proliferated, many of which affect the status of women. The issues over which the struggle to remove the restrictions of religious coercion that pertain to women has taken place concern both legislation and

lifestyle: every year, a proposal to certify civil marriage and divorce as an alternative to religious marriage is raised in the Knesset; there is a struggle to return the social article to the Abortions Law, according to which women may abort for social reasons and not just health reasons (this article was removed from the law under pressure from the religious and Ultra-Orthodox parties); there is a struggle to cancel ceremonies that are hurtful to women, such as the levirate divorce (*halitza*) ceremony; there is a struggle over the right of women to pray at the [Western Wall](#) (in services held by a group of women, the 'Women of the Wall,' who come to pray at the wall each month); there is a struggle over the right of women to serve as rabbis; there is a desire that Torah study and prayer be mixed-gender; there is a struggle against separate seating for men and women on buses; and there is a struggle against attacks on Ultra-Orthodox women for dressing immodestly. Regarding most of these issues, no real change has been achieved.

Nevertheless, there have been significant achievements on behalf of women during the past decade in several areas of religion-state relations: The establishment of family courts (1994) abrogated the exclusive control of the rabbinical courts; the advancement of legislation to rescue 'chained women' (*agunot*) from their husbands' refusal to grant a divorce; the increased number of Ultra-Orthodox women in higher education (especially due to the establishment of an Ultra-Orthodox college for women in Jerusalem); and the first steps are being taken to professionally train and integrate Ultra-Orthodox women into the workforce.

The Status of Arab Women in Israel

The [Arab](#) minority constitutes approximately 20% of Israel's population. On one hand, the Arab minority is a full participant in society and has greatly progressed along with the prosperity of the State of Israel. On the other hand, there is discrimination that created socioeconomic gaps between Jews and Arabs, and there is often nationalist tension between the majority and the minority. Arab women suffer from a double dose of discrimination in many areas: First, their participation in the workforce is a mere 22%, less than half the figure for Jewish women. This is a major hurdle preventing their growth and integration into society and politics. Additionally, the fact that education and welfare services in the Arab sector are inferior further harms the women.

Second, they suffer from the discrimination of Arab men since the patriarchal culture of [Israeli Arabs](#) has been slower to unravel than in the Jewish sector, and concepts

such as “honor killings,” “ownership and control of the wife by the husband”, and “arranged marriages” are more common in it. Nevertheless, Arab – [Bedouin](#), [Druze](#), and Christian – women have been establishing more and more nonprofit organizations to struggle for the advancement of Arab women. The significant achievements of Arab women in recent decades include their entry into the salaried workforce, their increasing inclusion in high school education and beyond, the establishment of family courts (in 2000), parallel to those in the Jewish sector, against the exclusivity of Sharia courts, and the rise of organized groups of Arab women to combat violence against Arab women.

The Struggle to Prevent Violence Against Women

The Prevention of Domestic Violence Law was enacted in Israel only in 1991. Until then, society was aware only of the serious crimes of rape and murder. However, in the 1970s, as part of the agenda of Israel’s feminist movement, Ruth Resnick raised the issue of violence against women in Israeli public debate.^[12] At first, the public was not aware of the phenomenon, but public advocacy efforts, the establishment of the first shelters for battered women, and media exposure of the issue increased awareness among the country’s population. Today, Israel has fourteen shelters for battered women, including two in the Arab sector and one in the Ultra-Orthodox sector, approximately sixty centers for treatment and consultation to prevent domestic violence, and additional centers with “hotlines.” Additionally, under pressure from women [Knesset](#) members and organizations for sexual assault victims, the state began to pay for treatment and assistance for victims of sexual assault and fund shelters and centers. The government also adopted several laws to protect women such as the Prohibition for Persons at Risk to Carry Weapons (1999) and the Prevention of Stalking Law (2002). Moreover, the police increased officer training on this issue, and women no longer encounter incredulity or contempt when they file complaints. Despite the improvements through legislation, increased awareness, and media exposure, sexual harassment and violence against women remain serious problems.

Prevention of Sexual Harassment

The Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law was legislated in Israel in 1998. The law was initiated by former Knesset member Yael Dayan and submitted by all women then serving in the Knesset. The law was one of the most progressive of its kind in the world. Its first accomplishment was the declaration of the objective of the law, which was defined broadly and comprehensively: “The purpose of this law is to

prohibit sexual harassment in order to defend human dignity, freedom and privacy and in order to promote equality between the sexes.” That is, it did not only provide protection against sexual harassment; it undertook to protect the dignity and freedom of women in the broadest possible sense.

The law defines five types of behavior that would be considered sexual harassment: extortion by threat; indecent acts; repeated propositions of a sexual nature addressed to a person who has demonstrated to the harasser that s/he is not interested in the said propositions; repeated references addressed to a person and focused on her/his sexuality, when that person has demonstrated that s/he is not interested in the said references; and a debasing reference to a person in connection with her/his sex or sexual preference. In other words, in two of the types of sexual harassment, the “obligation of refusal” devolves upon the woman, and the repeated act is otherwise completely legitimate. However, even these two types of harassment are prohibited *a priori* and do not require refusal under the following conditions: toward a minor or helpless person; within a caregiver-patient relationship; toward an employee within the framework of an employment relationship; toward a person in military or police service; within a student-teacher relationship. It was also established that sexual harassment and bothering are criminal offenses.

The law is also innovative in that it obligates employers and higher education institutions to take preventive measures in the workplace: to publicly display the content of the law; to hold seminars and public workshops, and to establish a disciplinary committee to handle complaints. An employer who does not do is exposed criminal charges.

Prevention of Trafficking in Women

In 2000, a parliamentary committee was established to fight against [trafficking in women](#). The committee was headed by former Member of Knesset Zehava Gal-On, who noted in the summary report of the committee’s activities: ^[13]“This ‘modern

slave trade' must not continue to exist in the State of Israel without garnering the attention of state authorities and legislative authorities. Human trafficking is a despicable phenomenon, the women experience atrocities and degradations, and everything must be done to prevent it." In the report it is estimated that 3,000 women are smuggled into Israel annually to work in the sex industry. This is a full-blown "industry" of trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and it includes smuggling, imprisonment, exploitation, and extortion. The sex industry has a turnover of roughly \$1 billion per annum. Most of the victims are young women, aged 18-35. They are smuggled across the [Egyptian](#) border, raped, beaten, and sold at public auctions for sums that range between \$1,000 and \$5,000. They are exposed to severe physical abuse both from the traffickers and from customers. Their passports are held by the traffickers to prevent them from fleeing, and they are completely subservient to their traffickers.

After a number of years of struggles progress has been achieved: increased public awareness, the passage of a law that prohibits human trafficking, imposes a minimum sentence on traffickers, and authorizes the police to close houses of ill repute. The police has enhanced its enforcement and lessened the number of trafficking victims; the number of traffickers who have been convicted in court has risen; a rehabilitative shelter for women who were victims of human trafficking has been established, and the Ministry of the Interior has issued visas for victims to remain in Israel and become legally employed.

Women Serving in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)

The patriarchal worldview views men as fighters and expects them to be valiant and heroic and to sacrifice themselves when necessary. In contrast, women are expected to stay at the home front during battles, to strengthen the economy and the home and, at a time of distress, to bear tragedy and bereavement in a dignified manner.

Women's movements have called this "social order" into question. Their objection is twofold: On one hand, presentation of an ethical philosophical outlook that opposes the world of wars, militarism, belligerence, destruction, and killing. In contrast, the feminist movements emphasize the approach of humanism, points of agreement, and mediation. In addition, the steep price that women pay during war has been written about and raised on the public agenda. On the other hand, women have claimed that as

long as countries have militaries, service should be open to women as well to ensure equality and to refine the behavior of combatants in training and in battle.

Israel is the only country in the world with compulsory military service for all men and women when they reach the age of 18 or complete their studies. This law stemmed from defensive necessity due to the fact that at the end of the [War of Independence](#), the young State of Israel was surrounded by enemy states and its population extremely small, about 600,000.

Throughout the existence of [IDF](#), the duration of service for men and women has been different. For example, men currently serve thirty-six months and women serve twenty months. Additionally, the 1986 Defense Service Law establishes that religious women are exempt from military service, and those who wish may enlist in the National Service, where they constitute an important auxiliary force within the community by performing activities such as serving as youth group leaders and aiding in hospitals and educational institutions. [Israeli Arabs](#) do not serve in IDF, and only a tiny minority joins the Civil Service, a program that began in recent years.

From an institutional perspective, during the first decades of the state women in the military were organized in a separate corps, headed by the Chief Women's Corps Officer. Over the past few decades, their integration into the various [IDF](#) units has increased, and a senior female officer serves as the Women's Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff.

Compulsory [IDF](#) service for women has inspired a variety of disputes in recent decades. The first is the issue of the nature and quality of women's service. The claim is that notwithstanding the women who are included in the tasks of training, welfare, and education, most young women are assigned to non-vocational roles, and their largely clerical functions do not take advantage of their high school education and their capabilities. Thus, there is a basic failure to achieve the goal of an equal take-off for women later in civilian life. Those who adopt this approach have struggled to open a much wider variety of military tasks to women serving in the military. In 1995 Alice Miller, together with the Women's Lobby and women [Knesset](#) members, led a campaign against IDF over her right to join flight training. When the military responded in the negative, Miller petitioned the Supreme Court. The military opposed on the grounds of physical incompatibility of women for the prestigious flight course and due to the large cost associated with adapting separate conditions for women. The High Court of Justice ruled that the principle of equality, which comprises one of the state's cardinal values, justifies and demands the financial investment. Since 1995, the flight course, and in its wake the Shayetet naval special force unit now enlists women. In 2000 a law was passed requiring the IDF to open combat service roles to thousands of women.

Another central issue is the promotion and placement of women in senior command positions. The struggle waged by the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women is not only to expand the range of vocations that women can hold in IDF, but also on the professional advancement of women in career military. Only a minority of female officers attain senior positions.

Another publicly debated issue is the institution of an alternative track to military service for women who are not religious but prefer community service to military service. A non-profit organization was established to allow for several hundred such community service workers. At the same time, in recent years demands for stricter tests of the degree of religiosity of women who claim to be religious have been mounting as women who simply declare that they are religious are not enlisted.

Women in the Peace Movement

In the wake of [U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325](#) (October 2000), which establishes the obligation to include women in peace negotiations, Israel passed a law in 2005 mandating adequate representation of women in peace negotiating teams. Even before this law was enacted, however, women have played a large part in the peace movements.

Peace Now is Israel's oldest peace movement. It was founded in 1978 with the publication of the "Officers' Letter,"^[14] a public letter to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, calling on him to make peace. The letter was signed by 10 officers, including [Yuli Tamir](#). Since then, Peace Now has diversified its activism to public education, demonstrations, and protests to put pressure on Israelis and Palestinians to advance peace initiatives. Women play significant and leading functions in the movement's activities, led by Janet Aviad, Galia Golan, Tamar Gozansky, and Shoshanna Kerem.

Women in Black is a women's protest movement that has adopted the *modus operandi* of the [South American](#) women's protest organization of the same name. The women have set themselves the goal of fighting against the occupation, and they have held protests for many years at intersections throughout Israel at set dates and times.

Bat Shalom is an organization of Jewish, Palestinian, and Arab women established in 1989 to nurture and encourage Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. Its major contribution was that the women preceded by several years the dialogue that led to the signing of the [Oslo Agreements](#) in 1993.

Four Mothers was established in 1997 with the objective of demanding that Israel withdraw from [Southern Lebanon](#). The organization originated after a tragic accident on February 4, 1997, when two transport helicopters carrying troops into Southern Lebanon collided killing all 73 soldiers on board. This incident prompted a group of mothers to organize to stop what they viewed as the “unending cost in blood of the ‘Lebanese quagmire.’”^[15] Protestors kept a vigil outside the prime minister’s residence and ultimately played a role in Prime Minister [Ehud Barak’s](#) decision in May 2000 to unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon.

While most of the peace groups are associated with the political left in Israel, **Women in Green** is a movement of women who oppose the withdrawal from occupied territories as well as any negotiations to establish a Palestinian state. While other peace movements see settlements as an obstacle to peace, WIG see them as an asset to Israeli security and therefore operate alongside official settler organizations.

Women and Poverty Post-2001

The levels of poverty in Israel grew between 2002 and 2003, and they have remained high ever since. In 2008, 19% of families (420,000 families, including 1,651,300 individuals) lived below the poverty line. The poverty level among children was even higher – 34% (783,000).

Social, economic, and budgetary policies impact all citizens of the state; however, the erosion of the welfare state and the growing level of poverty had a disproportionately negative impact on women. This is due to three causes: First, poverty among pensioners in [Israel](#) is very high, 22.7%,^[16] and there are more female pensioners than male pensioners because the average life expectancy of women is five years longer than that of men (81 for women versus 76 for men). Nearly one-third of all women on pensions live below the poverty line. Second, poverty among single parents is even higher (28.8%) than that for pensioners and, because the vast majority of single parents are women, they suffer the most. Third, working women find themselves in a lower economic stratum because they represent a majority of minimum wage-earners.^[17]

Legislation for the Advancement of Women

The advancement of the status of women requires, in the first place, social and economic changes as well as changes in awareness, although legislation makes a

significant contribution by shaping public policies and by requiring citizens to act in accordance with them.

The [Knesset](#) has legislated a variety of laws that aim to protect and advance women's rights (see appendix). However, Israel still lacks certain important legal protections and inadequately enforces existing laws.

As noted earlier, a significant problem is the relationship between religion and the state and its implications for women's rights in matters of personal status. In addition, the state has not provided adequate arrangements to facilitate two careers. The failure to implement laws such as the Free Education from Age Three Law (1998) and the Extended School Day Law (1997) has harmed the ability of women to enter the workforce and to keep a reasonable balance between their two careers – work and family.

The existence of enlightened and progressive laws does not ensure the actual improvement of the status of women due to the lack of implementation of the laws, the state's lax enforcement, the allocation of paltry resources, and the small number of lawsuits filed by women. Israel established the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission in 2006 to address some of the shortcomings of the existing laws and to strengthen the equality of the status of women at work.

Organizations for the Advancement of Women

The shaping and advancing of the status of women in Israel, as in any country, is the product of cultural world views, public policy, and legislation, but also no less the product of an institutional and organizational network tasked with the implementation and assimilation of the policy. This began with Israel's women's organizations. Na'amat (The Movement of Working Women & Volunteers), founded as part of the [Histadrut General Labor Federation](#) in 1920, has been the largest women's organization for decades. Na'amat's two major projects were the establishment of day-care centers for preschoolers nationwide and the establishment of units to treat and advise women throughout the country, in the Jewish and Arab sectors alike. Other organizations that have made positive contributions to the status of women include Emuna and [WIZO](#).

Since the 1980s, the institutional network for women has expanded. In 1984, another extra-parliamentary organization, the **Israel Women's Lobby**, headed by Prof. Alice Shalvi, was founded. The emphasis of the Women's Lobby is on the involvement of women in shaping legislation and influencing the policy of decision-makers.

Traditional women's organizations also became more active in politics in addition to continuing their field work.

In the 1990s, women of Mizrahi origin (Jews from Arab countries) founded their own organization, **Ahoti**, because they did not feel the existing women's organizations reflected the variety of women in Israel. Organizers saw a need to empower [Mizrahi](#), [Ethiopian](#), and [Arab](#) women, as well as the weakest women from a socioeconomic vantage point,

In addition to these nongovernmental organizations, the state also became more active in creating mechanisms for the advancement of women starting with the institutionalizing of the position of Prime Minister's Advisor on the Status of Women in the 1980s, following the publication of the first Report on the Status of Women. Other state-sponsored initiatives included:

- In 1992, the founding of the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women, which has made a major contribution by leveraging the issue of the advancement of women in Israel through legislation, by shaping public policy, by raising awareness, and through supervision.
- In 1995, the role of Supervisors of the Advancement of the Status of Women was institutionalized in all government ministries and public companies.
- In 1996, the Authority on the Status of Women was founded within the Prime Minister's Office, replacing the Advisor. This upgrade was necessary to give the authority the tools to operate a real program for the advancement of women. Additionally, a Supervisor of the Advancement of Women in the State Service Commission, Adv. Rivka Shaked, was appointed at that time.
- In 2000, the umbrella for the advancement of women was broadened with the passage of the Appointment of a Supervisor of the Status of Women to all Local Authorities in Israel Law (the law was amended in 2008 to increase their powers and budgets).
- In 2008, an Equal Employment Opportunities Commission was established and tasked with advancing and preventing discrimination against women, minorities, and other discriminated populations.

Achievements and Failures in the Advancement of Women in Israel

The balance sheet for the advancement of women is mixed. On the positive side major achievements include:

1. The entry of women into the labor market broadening their importance in all sectors.
2. Israel's legislation is amongst the world's most progressive, raising awareness, oversight and institutionalizing supervision.
3. Providing greater protection to women by intensifying the struggles against violence toward women, sexual harassment and the trafficking in women.
4. Increasing awareness and information, including the commemoration of International Women's Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.
5. Strengthening the voice of women in social-cultural formation; women in literature, the media, religion, peace, and war.
6. Approaching equality in the number of students in higher education, including doctoral students, and instituting Gender Studies.
7. A pluralistic outlook that incorporates feminism's attitude toward various populations such as single-parents and lesbians.
8. Expansion of feminism to all areas: health, disability, sports; and all sectors: the periphery, immigrants, Arabs, and pensioners.
9. Advancement of sexual equality in the military; this constitutes the jumping-off point for women into their civilian lives.
10. Supreme Court rulings on representation of women in religious councils, a flexible retirement age for working women, affirmative action and others precedents that have expanded women's rights.

These positive steps forward must be seen in the context of a number of failures and challenges that remain for the advancement of women, including:

1. The failure to embrace the idea that the development of women has potential for the society and the state.
2. Slowing of the process of integration of women into the workplace; Arab women, making the retirement age earlier, part-time work. [unclear]
3. The continued existence of pay gaps in the public and private sectors and the failure to raise minimum wage.
4. The perpetuation of a glass ceiling preventing women from reaching senior positions in the public and private sector.
5. The lack of implementation of affirmative action laws.

6. Failure to construct society for two breadwinners per family, as lack of free education from age three, extended school day, etc.
7. No separation of religion and state in matters of personal status
8. Under-representation politically; on the national level (in the Knesset and the government) and in municipal authorities.
9. Deficient enforcement, mainly of labor laws, and lenient rulings; especially rulings that harm women.
10. Insufficient funding for ministerial and municipal supervisors, for education, and for women's organizations.
11. Slow assimilation, cultural change, and educational processes; low availability of information for some of the state's populations.

Overall, the status of women in Israel has advanced greatly, especially during the 1990s. Nevertheless, the status of women in the future will be decided not only by feminist perspectives, but by the public policy that Israel adopts.

Appendix

Legislation for the Advancement of Women in Israel

A. General legislation to strengthen the status of women.

The status and civil rights of women in Israel as a whole is based on the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Freedom 5752-1992, inasmuch as it is the basic law for all human rights in Israel. The Women's Equal Rights Law, 5711-1951, amended in 2000, makes explicit the rights of women.

B. Laws regarding the status of women in family matters

As noted, Israeli legislation compromised with the status quo on matters of religion and state, and therefore marriage and divorce are regulated under the Rabbinical Courts' Jurisdiction (Marriage and Divorce) Law, 5713-1953 and the Rabbinical Court (Implementation of Divorce Judgment) Law, 5755-1995. Nevertheless, the establishment of family courts was instituted in 5755-1995, and was extended to non-Jewish sectors in 2000. Other family matters that were enshrined by law are the 1972 Child Support Law; the Single Parent Families Act, 5752-1992; the Surrogate

Motherhood Agreements Act, 5756-1996; the Property Relations between Spouses (Amendment No. 4) Law, 5769-2008, which obligates spouses to equally divide at the time of divorce all assets that they accumulated jointly, including savings that accumulated from the marriage (the law replaced the discriminatory arrangement that had been the law since 1973).

C. Legislation to ensure the rights of women in society and welfare

In this issue, the main legislation that pertains to women appears in two major laws that are designed for the entire population, in which there are adaptations specifically for women. These are the National Insurance Law (Consolidated Version), 5755-1995 and the Income Tax Ordinance Act (Consolidated Version). In this legislation, the various articles enshrine entitlements that pertain specifically to women, such as allocating birth costs and birth grants, child allowances and tax credits.

D. Advancement and protection of women in the workplace

Israeli legislation pertaining to the advancement of women in the work place is diverse and progressive in the main. The principle laws are: The Employment of Women Law (5714-1954); the Male and Female Workers (Equal Retirement Age) Law, 5747-1987; the Employment (Equal Opportunities) Law, 5748-1988; the Male and Female Workers Equal Pay Law, 5756-1996 (which replaced the earlier law on this issue from 1964); the Public Tender Act (Amendment No. 15), 5763-2003 (preference for businesses owned by women in government tenders); the Retirement Age Act, 5764-2004; the Employment (Equal Opportunities) Law (Amendment: Establishment of an Equal Employment Opportunities Commission), 5766-2006; Encouragement of Integration and Advancement of Women at Work and the Adaptation of Workplaces for Women Law, 5768-2008; each law enshrines the rights of working women and obligates the state and employers in the specified area under the law.

E. Integration of women in public life and ensuring representation of women

Issues of enlistment of women into the IDF are enshrined in this framework: the Defense Service Law, 5719-1959 and the National Service Law from the same year. In 2000, an amendment was inserted into the Defense Service Law (Amendment No. 11) (Women in Combat Units), 5760-2000; the issue of institutionalization of

mechanisms to handle the advancement of women was anchored in the law: The Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, 5758-1998 as well as the Local Authorities Law (Advisor on Matters of the Status of Women), 5760-2000. Regarding the issue of ensuring representation of women, the following laws were legislated: The Governmental Companies Law (Amendment No. 6) (Adequate Representation), 5753-1993, which mandates the representation of women in public boards of directors and was later expanded to private boards of directors as well; the State Service (Appointments) Law (Amendment No. 8) (Adequate Representation of Women in State Service), 5755-1995; the Women's Equal Rights Law (Amendment No. 3), 5765-2005, which obligates the state to ensure adequate representation of women in bodies that conduct peace negotiations, and laws that establish responsibility for adequate representation of women on national councils of health, culture, and sports.

F. Prevention of domestic violence

The following laws exist for this subject: The Prevention of Domestic Violence Law, 5751-1991; the Sexual Harassment Prevention Law, 5758-1998; the Firearms Law (Amendment No. 12), 5759-1999, which prevents an at-risk person from bearing a weapon; the Prevention of Stalking Law, 5761-2001; the Anti-Trafficking Law (5767-2007).

Notes

[1] Micheal Gluzman (2007). *The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew)

[2] It is worth noting that Aharon David Gordon voiced opposition as a minority. See Einat Ramon (2007). *A New Life: Religion, Motherhood and Supreme Love in the Works of A.D. Gordon*. Carmel (Hebrew)

[3] Shulamit Aloni (1973). *Women as Human Beings*, Keter, Jerusalem (Hebrew)

[4] Dafna Izraeli *et al* (1982). *The Double Bind: The Status of Women in Israel*, Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).

[5] Virginia Woolf (1929), *A Room of One's Own*

[6] Broadbridge, 1997; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007; Joshi & Paci, 1998; Manning, 2003; Rubery, 2002

[7] Ya'ara Buksbaum, Michal Dagan, Omayama Dayyab, and Dorit Abramovitch (2008). *Women Workers in a Precarious Employment Market*, Haifa, Mahut. (Hebrew with English summary)

[8] Based on statistical reports of the Knesset archive and Anat Maor (2009). *Private Legislation of Knesset Members*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad. (Hebrew)

[9] Galia Golan, "Guaranteed Representation of Women in the Field of Politics," in: Anat Maor (ed.) (2004). *Affirmative Action and Equal Representation in Israel*, Tel Aviv University: Ramot (Hebrew)

[10] See, for example, the book by the Israel Women's Lobby (1996). *Politics is for Me*, Jerusalem, Women's Lobby. (Hebrew) UP, 2004.

[11] See, for example: Ilana Pardes (1992). *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press; Ruthie Ravitzky (ed.). *Women Read from the Beginning: Creative Women Write about the Book of Genesis* (2003), Tel Aviv, Yediot Aharonot (Hebrew)

[12] Ms. Ruth Reznick won the Israel Prize in 2009 for her thirty years of important work to prevent violence against women in Israel.

[13] Report of the Parliamentary Investigative Committee against the Trafficking of Women, the Knesset, 2006. Written by the committee chairperson, MK Zehava Gal-On. (Hebrew)

[14] The "Officers' Letter" is the name given to the letter, signed by 10 reserve officers, to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, in which they claim that if Israel does not advance peace, it places the soldiers into the conflict as combatants. They therefore urge him to advance the peace process. The fact that the petitioners were officers in select units had a major impact.

[15] The founders of Four Mothers are: Rachel Ben-Dor of Rosh Pina, Ronit Nachmias and Yaffa Arbel of Kibbutz Gadot, Miri Sela of Mahanayim, and Zahara Antavi of Maayan Baruch. The interviews were conducted by students in my seminar, Inbal and Yuval Farno, in 2008.

[16] The data come from the Poverty Report of the Research Department of the National Insurance Institute, 2008 Summary.

[17] Many studies have found a link between gender and poverty, and this phenomenon has been termed "the feminization of poverty." In a new, wide-ranging study by Brady and Kall, the researchers establish that among the elderly, the scope of poverty becomes more severe only among women. See David Brady and Denise Kall (2007). "The Feminization of Poverty in

Affluent Western Democracies, 1969-2000,” Luxembourg Income Study, Working Papers No. 462.