

DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ISRAELI POLITICS: SOCIAL-HISTORIC REFERENCES AND EXPLANATIONS

Dr. Sara Zamir

Ben Gurion University, Eilat & Achva Academic College, Israel

ABSTRACT

There is no question that the women's struggle for the right to vote and be elected, was a cornerstone of the establishment of Israel's young democracy. Yet, after the declaration of principles for women's suffrage was affirmed at the Zionist Congress in 1899, women's struggle for political equality, and the subject of their representation in the institutions of power in Israel, was not yet over and remains very much alive till this very day. Furthermore, one significant development in the direction of democratization in Israel that took place during the 1980s – namely, transferring the candidates' selection process for the major parties to the Knesset from the organizing committees to the electoral bodies – did not particularly improve the status of women in politics in Israel. This organizational change did, however, lead to changes in the profile of the Israeli politician (whereas the old model of a politician was Ashkenazi, a veteran, someone from the center of the country and a man; since then a large group of immigrants from Asia / Africa, the children of immigrants and people from the periphery have entered the upper echelons of the parties), but for the most part the characteristic of the Israeli politician remains male.

This article reviews the issue of women in Israeli politics from a diachronic perspective; presents the fundamental sociological reasons for the current situation and finally examines what can be done about it.

Keywords: Women in politics, young democracy, democratization, women's suffrage.

INTRODUCTION

History of the status of women in the Zionist political establishment

As early as 1899, the Zionist Congress recognized the right of women to be elected to the emerging Zionist organizations. At that time, this right was not yet customary even in the most reformed Western countries: for example, in Denmark women were given the vote in 1915; England and Sweden in 1918; Germany in 1919 and in the United States not until 1920.

Despite the radical / revolutionary nature of the Zionist movement, changes in social and national attitudes with regard to women were not translated in kind, and they did not share in the Zionist leadership. There was not even one female representative at the first Zionist Congress, and the few women who did attend the Congress were escorting their husbands or fathers. Describing his impressions

NORDSCI CONFERENCE

of the Zionist Congress, Sholem Aleichem wrote: "Much would have been detracted from the Jewish Parliament if not for the participation of beautiful Jewish women, true daughters of Zion . . . G-d created them to decorate, to beautify, to adorn and to glorify our lives . . . they look like colorful flowers in our Jewish garden, and they provide our Congress with a special charm. What a shame that none of them wants to or is capable of performing on the podium." [3].

According to Elboim Dror [3], at the time when the Zionist Organization was leading the progressive classes - at least with regard to granting women's suffrage - things were different in the renewed settlement in Israel. When Menachem Ussishkin arrived in the Land of Israel in 1903 to establish "the Israeli Organization", opposition arose among the ultra-Orthodox to granting women's suffrage, contrary to opinion of the delegation of the Odessa Committee of Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion). Ussishkin surrendered, and the women did not participate in the elections. The question of women's suffrage rose again after the First World War, during the formative meetings prior to the elections for the assembly of representatives held in 1920. The objection of the ultra-Orthodox to granting women the right to vote, which won the support of Rabbi Kook, also pushed the middle eastern Jews to more extreme positions, until a compromise was reached, according to which the ultra-Orthodox voted in separate polling-booths.

The European liberal world of ideas, which led the Zionist Federation at the start, came up against a brick wall in the Land of Israel, where most of the inhabitants during the relevant period were members of the "old settlement" (Jews who had been living in the land of Israel long before the Zionist movement). However, in 1926 the continued struggle by women from different ends of the political spectrum led to a decision by the General Assembly affirming "equal rights for women in all aspects of life in the 'yishuv' (Hebrew settlement) - civil, political, and economic". This declaration was legally validated by the Mandate Government in 1927, but its implementation required many years of struggle [3], [4], [9].

Until the establishment of the State - and throughout the entire British Mandate period (1920 - 1948), the Assembly of Representatives was the elected parliamentary body of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel. Deputies to the Assembly of Representatives were elected on the basis of national / proportional party elections. The representation rate for women throughout the period did not exceed 12%. The Assembly of Representatives, which was a sort of legislative body, elected the National Committee - the executive body which conducted the affairs of the Jewish community in Israel and represented the community versus the British rule until the establishment of the State. After the UN resolution on the partition of Israel, and prior to the Declaration of Independence on the establishment of the State, a National Council was established, from which a selected body was elected, known as the "People's Administration". The Council had 38 members representing the Settlement in Israel and members of the Zionist movement, thirty-six men and only two women: Golda Meir and Rachel Cohen-Kagan. After the Declaration of Independence of

the State of Israel (5th of Iyar 5708, 14.05.1948) the People's Council became the Zionist Commission and the National Council became provisional government. There was not one single woman among the members of the provisional government.

In accordance with the Declaration of Independence, elections were held for the Constituent Assembly during the month of Tevet **5709** - January 1949. That was when the residents of the State of Israel went to the polls for the first time to elect their representatives. On the 17th of Shvat 5709 the Constituent Assembly became the first Knesset (Parliament) of Israel. In the first Knesset, women accounted for only about 9% of its elected officials. During the first Knesset there was only one Minister - Golda Meir served as Minister of Labour and the People's Insurance (later to become the National Insurance Institute).

Table 1. *The relative share of women in the Israeli Parliament*

Knesset (Parliament)	The number of women in Knesset (excluding partial terms and male rotation)	The rate of women out of the total number of members of Parliament (in percentages)
First	11	9.1%
Second	11	9.1%
Third	10	8.3%
Fourth	9	7.5%
Fifth	10	8.3%
Sixth	9	7.5%
Seventh	8	6.6%
Eighth	10	8.3%
Ninth	8	6.6%
Tenth	8	6.6%
Eleventh	10	8.3%
Twelfth	7	5.8%
Thirteenth	10	8.3%
Fourteenth	9	7.5%
Fifteenth	14	11.6%
Sixteenth	18	15%
Seventeenth	17	14.2%
Eighteenth	21	17.5%

The data are a sample from the government information site: <http://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/data/pdf/m02446.pdf>

Last Knesset: 12th of June 2014

NORDSCI CONFERENCE

A review of the table above shows that in the years following the establishment of the first Knesset and through to the Fifteenth Knesset, the majority of the Knesset plenary contained even fewer women than those in the first Knesset. True, Israel is one of the few countries in the world whose government was led by a woman - Golda Meir (1969-1974). This served, at the time, as an argument justifying Israel's image as a pioneer of equality between the sexes; but now it is clear, beyond any doubt, that Golda Meir's achievement was an extraordinary phenomenon, and there have been Israeli governments which served without any women Ministers whatsoever. It is important to note in this context that precisely during Golda Meir's term as Prime Minister there was neither a female Minister nor a female Deputy Minister appointed.

Table 2 Sample ranking of countries according to the number of women in Parliament

Rate of women parliamentarians altogether

Place in the ranking	Country	The ratio of women parliamentarians altogether, in percentages
1	Rwanda	63.8%
2	Andorra	50.0%
3	Cuba	48.9%
53	Iraq	25.3%
66	Israel	22.5%
71	Greece	21.0%
84	United States	18.3%
149	Qatar	0.0%
"	Micronesia	0.0%

*The data for this table were taken from the database of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) which was dependent on the information received from the national parliaments of the countries. The list presented is partial. For the complete list see <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> the last entry being 13 July 2014

**In countries that have a two-house parliament the data refers to the lower house only.

This data from around the world is not very complimentary to Israel despite its trending improvement in female representation. Israel is in 66th place regarding female representation in its parliament. Rwanda is ahead of Israel by a large margin with 63.8% representation. Cuba and Angola are also ahead of Israel. Enlightened USA actually trails Israel, even though female representation is recently making headlines due to the candidacy of Hillary Clinton for the office of President.

Trending improvement in female representation in parliaments is not unique to Israel. By the end of 1977 only 13 countries could boast that at least one fourth of their parliament was composed of women. By April 2013 the number of countries whose parliaments were one fourth women was 49. This improvement was not only because of social and cultural transformations but also, as we shall see in part four, because of the adoption of representation quotas[10].

Sociological explanations regarding the status of women in current Israeli politics

Sociologists dealing with the shaky situation of women in Israeli politics offer a variety of explanations when attempting to explain the meaning of the phenomenon. Amongst the many explanations offered there are four that are fundamental:

1. The nature of the traditional religious norms prevalent in Israel
2. The centrality of security issues in Israel
3. Ambivalent messages put forward by educators
4. Activities of male dominated centers of power in Israel

The first explanation analyzes traditional and religious norms as they pertain to women in society [7]. According to the authors, every stage of a woman's life in Judaism is based on her status as a passive persona – as a virgin, as being engaged and as an aguna (unable to remarry because her husband refuses to grant her a divorce). Even the compassion demanded by Judaism for widows and orphans highlights the powerlessness of the woman. She is devoid of all ceremonial religious duties, with the exception of lighting the Sabbath candles. She cannot be counted as part of a Minyan, is not qualified to recite the Kiddush, to read from the Torah in synagogue or to be a witness before the Rabbinic, the Sovereign or the Courts. It is a very short way from here to reach the generalized conclusion that she is not worthy to fulfil public duties in general and governmental duties in particular.

This explanation is supported by the conduct of the Haredi (ultra-orthodox) parties, who have always prevented women from holding any leadership positions. Take, for example, the election of Golda Meir to Prime Minister representing the Labour Party: the religious parties agreed to be part of the coalition government only after they got approval from the rabbis. And even now, as I write these lines, the Haredi parties deny women entry into their ranks. Such tendencies have clear and direct consequences regarding not only the representation of women in Haredi parties, but also indirect consequences regarding the participation of women in various coalition governments that require the participation of the Haredi factions.

The second explanation lays the blame on the centrality of security issues which arise on the public agenda almost on a daily basis, and which more than anything else are identified with the maleness of the security establishment. In this connection we can envisage a flowchart the purpose of which is to denote

accepted areas for female personnel in the army. Accordingly, women do not serve in combat units, do not serve in reserves, and their tour of duty is shorter than that of their male counterparts. As a consequence, structural inequality is created in regards to their assignments, their training and their advancement in the army. This causes gender segregation in civilian frameworks, which that view a military career as a prerequisite for success [5].

According to the military service law (Para. 16a – every woman has equal rights to a man in any job having to do with military service) female soldiers can fill a variety of combat and support combat roles such as: flight controllers, simulation instructors, computer officers, paramedics, search and rescue, combat material operations, and more. However the leading roles in a military career are still off limits, and in the higher echelons of command men still have a leading role. Only in 2011 was a woman finally promoted to the rank of general, when she was appointed commander of the human resources division.

The third explanation regarding the predicament of women in politics lays blame at the feet of the agents of education who reinforce stereotypical female images which, in the end, damage the abilities of both women and men to accept women as political figures. An analysis of stereotypes in Israeli textbooks [2], [8], reveals that boys are described as active, resourceful, initiating, clever, curious, brave, and adventuress. Girls, in contrast, are shown as passive, submissive, pretty, maudlin, and helpless. The list of male occupations is long and very detailed. Most of them can be categorized as molding ones environment, creating and controlling material and people. Female occupations are very limited. Women in most cases are mothers, grandmothers or wives. Describing women in a professional capacity is most rare and if done at all is mostly in professions that are traditionally described as women's professions: teacher, nurse or kindergarten teacher.

According to Herzog [6], the political socialization process impairs the aspirations of women to get involved in politics. Women are educated from an early age regarding social expectations: how to fill their feminine roles, what normative ambitions are acceptable, how to divide time between home and career, in what areas they are expected to find fulfilment and what areas are described as completely unfeminine. These kind of unwritten expectations are not compatible with political activity which is mostly perceived as achievement-oriented and competitive, and based on the desire for power and control.

The fourth explanation for the dilemma of women in politics assumes that male centers of power in society that operate in ways to duplicate and reproduce the existing situation are the stumbling blocks to female mobility in politics. These explanations, which are Marxist in essence, describe a system of ruled and rulers: the rulers – those who control the infrastructure – also impose their values and ideas, the entire purpose of which is to justify their rule and to present them as objective ironclad principles. Respectively, since men from the outset 'man' key political positions in the public sphere in general and in the party hierarchy in particular, and as such are interested in maintaining the existing situation that is

favourable to them, the mobility of women is impeded and they are unable to breakthrough to leadership positions as if there were a glass ceiling over their heads.

Whatever the accuracy of any of these explanations, the phenomenon must concern anyone who wishes to live in a progressive democratic society. Since women in Israeli society constitute a little more than half of the population (51%) their absence from positions of power and influence constitutes a serious flaw in democratic representation.

Women not only find it difficult to achieve appropriate representation in various official new and legacy frameworks, they also fail to establish women's lists that are attractive for the electorate: this at the same time that various parties in the Knesset represent and have represented various sectors of the population according to ethnic group and class, yet there is no comparable representation for women. The Women's List that was founded in 1997 ran for the Knesset, but also failed.

How to overcome the low representation of women in Israeli politics?

One way to overcome the poor representation of women is for the Knesset to establish a quota. A minimal quota is one way to increase female representation in politics in general, and in parliament in particular. In the 90s especially this method became widespread globally and was so efficient in achieving this goal to the extent that some have branded it "quotas fever".

These quotas strengthened the perception that the political abilities of women are no less than those of men; rather that their abilities are pushed to the margins and cannot be realized in a political system controlled for the most part by men. As of today, more than 30 countries have established representational quotas for women in elections to the national parliament, either by way of amending the constitution or by way of special election laws. In more than 50 countries, representational quotas for parliamentary elections were expressed in the internal rules of the parties themselves [1].

The first step taken in this direction was a law passed by a preliminary vote in the Knesset in 2005, which proposed that parties whose Knesset factions are composed of at least 30% women will receive additional funding of 50% for every woman elected. This law passed by a margin of 53 for and 22 against with 4 abstentions. The relatively large number of those opposed bears witness to the fact that the quota system as a way to correct the distortion of lack of female representation in the Israeli political system has not been fully accepted.

Another approach is proactive action on the part of women's organizations seeking increased awareness of the poor representation of women in Israeli politics and as a consequence want to repair the current situation. Over the past decade, in addition to the ongoing activities of the "Women's Lobby", the Emuna movement (religious women) began to conduct intensive seminars concerning women in politics, with the aim of raising the consciousness regarding their status in politics. "WIZO Israel" initiated an information campaign to promote women

NORDSCI CONFERENCE

in politics under the banner "This Time We Vote Women". The aim was to get women to register, to vote and to be elected within the various parties, according to their own political preference. This was not limited to internal activity in Israel: in 2005, Israeli women's organizations presented the United Nations with shadow reports describing the pathetic picture of lack of women's progress in the public sphere. The reports were given to the World Committee of the UN dealing with women as alternatives to the official reports provided by the state institutions [11], [12].

CONCLUSION

The women's struggle for their rights to vote and to be elected has, without a doubt, been vital for the building of Israel's young democracy. However, since the statement of principles of women's right to vote and be elected was ratified in the 1899 Zionist Congress, the struggle for women's equal political rights and the issue of female representation in the power centers of Israel still continues.

Only in the 90s, did the Israeli public become conscious and the political elites begin to understand the need to increase equality between men and women. As part of the process in which the consciousness of liberalism and equality within various strata of society became stronger, Israeli society became aware of the desirability for affirmative action, the aim of which would be improving the status of women by way of constitutional and legal means designed to guarantee not only the opportunity for women to be appointed to public office, but to be appointed in actuality [13].

Female representation means, in point of fact, more women candidates and more voters for them on both the national and the municipal level. Wider representation increases the chances that women will influence decisions that affect their lives such as discrimination in the areas of income, resources for daycare centers, maintaining women's rights at work and in other organizations. These and others will receive greater validation in the public discourse when more and more women occupy key political positions.

REFERENCES

[1] Ben David, L. Legislation in Israel determining appropriate representation for women – overview document, The Committee for the Advancement of the status of Women, Jerusalem: the Knesset, 2005.

[2] Ben Zvi- Meir, S. (1995). Stereotypes in text books, in Finding One's Equal – an anthology for teachers, Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture 1995, pp. 140-143

[3] Elboim Dror, R. Women in the Zionist Utopias, Kathedra, No. 66, Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi Publications 1992, pp. 111-143.

[4] Fogel-Bijawi, S. The struggle for what is taken for granted, Noga, Winter 1994, Issue 21

[5] Gerby, A. The Double Price – the Status of Women in Israeli Society and Women's Service in the IDF, Tel Aviv, Ramot Press, 1996.

[6] Herzog, H. *Realistic Women: Women in Local Politics in Israel*, Jerusalem, Jerusalem Institute for Israel Research, 1994.

[7] Israeli, D., Friedan, A. & Schrift, R. *Women in a 'Catch-22'*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Press, 1982.

[8] Meller, T. The reflection of gender stereotypes in text books in the state education in Israel, in *Finding One's Equal – an anthology for teachers*, Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, pp. 144-160, 1995.

[9] Safran, H. *Don't Want to be Nice*. Haifa: Pardes Press, 2006.

[10] Shapiro, A., Koenig, A., Friedberg, H. Itzkovich-Malka, R. *A Comparative Look at Women's Representation in Israeli Politics*, Jerusalem: Israel Institute for Democracy, 2013.

[11] Sinai, R. 1. A new law will compensate parties with a high representation of women, *Haaretz newspaper*, Wednesday, March 2, 2005.

[12] Sinai, R.. "Report submitted to the UN:Israel's government promotes women", *Haaretz newspaper*, Wednesday, July 6, 2005.

[13] Zamir, S. On the problem of the status of women in Israeli politics, Chapter in a book edited by L. Bratz and A. Gilad, *My Voice – Your Voice: Gender, Education and Society*, (pp. 9-32), Published by the Ministry of Education and Achva College, 2007.