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## GOLDA NOTWITHSTANDING: PARTICIPATION AND POWERLESSNESS

### Or, How Much Political Power Do Israeli Women Have?

1. We all have heard many times that old litany recited by those claiming that Israeli women were equal, or at least more equal than women in other countries, and that therefore Israel had no need of feminism : Golda was a central item; the litany also included the Ketuba, that ancient Jewish institution, communal childcare in the Kibbutz, women's service in the Israeli army, and sometimes also the Declaration of Independence.

Nowadays we are sophisticated about all these items: we know that none of them signifies gender equality, and may not even advance it. As to the Ketuba: the halachic marriage law may have originally been more humane than that of other contemporary societies, but it certainly is not egalitarian. It grants Jewish husbands the right to all the income from their wives' work and all the profits from their wives' property, as long as the marriage lasts; it also grants only men the initiative of divorce. In the Ketuba (marriage contract) the bridegroom merely undertakes to pay his bride a certain sum in case of future divorce. Communal child care in the Kibbutz certainly was an interesting innovation, but as only women were supposed to be communal caretakers, it did not overcome the basic obstacle to women's equality which is caused by the assumption that child care is exclusively or mainly women's responsibility. Although it permitted all Kibbutz women to work full time outside their own households, it also fostered an extreme occupational segregation between men and women. Obligatory military service by women might have served as a factor advancing gender equality had it involved women equally in its obligations and opportunities; in practice it is unequal in length, far from universal, largely segregated, auxiliary, and inferior in its opportunities for vocational training.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence indeed mentions that the State of Israel will eschew discrimination on the basis of gender - but this is not the equivalent of gender

equality being written in the constitution, as the Declaration has no constitutional standing. To date no constitutional law concerning the rights of women has superseded the blatantly unequal treatment of Israeli Jewish women by the Rabbinical courts and of Israeli Moslem women by the Khadis.

And so to Golda: Golda Meir served in the highest, most powerful political position of the country, that of Prime Minister; she was helped neither by the influence and/or tutelage of a politician father, like Indira Gandhi or Benazir Bhutto, nor of a politician husband, like Evita Peron, Mrs. Bandaranaike, or Corazon Akino, but had risen through years of holding party, diplomatic and cabinet posts, like Margaret Thatcher. Incidentally all these women have demonstrated amply that the old assumptions about women's essential inability to function in top level politics, are worthless and false stereotypes.

Yet, unfortunately, one lone woman in a national leadership position, even if she got there without family patronage, neither signifies the high status of women in that society, nor does it guarantee that she will succeed to improve women's position or even attempt to do so. Though herself a "strong woman" who had fought for her own chance to enter politics, Golda certainly was no feminist, but a traditionalist concerning gender roles; she also did nothing to facilitate the entry into or the advancement of other women in Israeli politics.

2. Why then is women's increased participation in public life important? Because without it women cannot acquire sufficient political power to abrogate the laws, and to change the institutions that hold women down, to enact laws that make all sorts of discrimination and violence against women punishable by law, and - most importantly - to protect any gains made by women.

Some consider an equal share of political power for women as synonymous with equal gender status in society. I consider power an essential, perhaps the most important component of gender status. Yet equal gender status also means equal access to resources and equal autonomy. These three components are largely interdependent. Women as a group need access to many more funds and to much more free time and freedom of movement, so as to be able to participate in politics, to become candidates, to be elected, and to persist. More political power can enable women to remove some of the

major obstacles to women's equal access to resources and to an equal measure of autonomy. Yet by the means of political power alone, it will not be possible to ensure for women that equality in their relations with men, equality in parenting, in the care of the elderly, in their choice of education and training, occupation and career, which are meant by equal access to resources and an equal measure of autonomy.

3. The classical women's movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries fought for the basic prerequisites to women's entry into public life: the rights to speak in public, to become legal persons, to hold property, to acquire an education, to train for and enter the professions, to pursue an occupation even without the permission of the husband, and, finally, to vote in national elections and to stand for political office.

In some countries this process was completed by the end of World War I, in others as late as the end of World War II. Votes for women became the hallmark of modernity. It was assumed by many that with the right to vote, women were equal before the law, indeed, that they had achieved equality.

In reality some newly independent states gave women the vote without abolishing all or some of the most blatant traditional restrictions on their participation in public life and thus turned their formal right to vote into a farce.

In many older industrialized societies important formal legal inequalities remained on the books, especially in family law. Nearly everywhere overt discrimination against women in the labour market remained legal even after they had gained the vote. In the areas of credit, insurance, property transactions, taxation and social insurance, women continued to be treated as men's dependents.

When women first got the vote, it was expected that many women would be elected to parliaments and to other elected bodies and offices. In reality, until quite recently all over the industrialized countries, on the average not more than 12 percent of the representatives in national assemblies were women. In the U.S Congress the number was - and still is - nearer 5 percent. An even smaller percentage of the positions in the most powerful parliamentary committees, in the Cabinet, in the highest echelons of the public service, of the foreign service, and in the highest courts, were occupied by women. For about half a century after the gain of the vote by women, political power remained almost

exclusively in the hands of men.

Only with the rise of The New Women's Movement towards the end of the sixties, concerted efforts were made to discover and analyze the obstacles to women's entry and success in politics, and to develop strategies and tactics for overcoming them. These obstacles are somewhat different in different countries and under different political systems. Also, different kinds of power have somewhat different weight. Therefore comparisons of the measure of success of women in overcoming the obstacles, and of the measure of power that women now hold in different societies, is not easy. Nevertheless let's try to see how Israel measures up.

#### 4. First the bare statistics:

##### I. The Knesseth, the Government and the political parties

I. a) Women members of the Knesseth. : Elections to the 120-member Knesseth took place twelve times since the establishment of the State of Israel, with the following results:

year:    number of women elected:    percentage of women elected:

1949,	11	9.1
1951,	11	9.1
1955,	11	9.1
1959,	9	7.5
1961,	10	8.3
1965,	9	7.5
1969,	8	6.6
1973,	8	6.6
1977,	8	6.6
1981,	9	7.5
1984,	10	8.3

1988

7

5.8

#### I. b) Women members of Government

In the past most of the times there usually was one woman minister or deputy minister in the government, the most well-known being Golda Meir, who served as Minister of Labour and Welfare and as Minister of Foreign Affairs before becoming the first and only female Prime Minister of Israel. Shulamith Aloni was Minister without Portfolio for six months. Very few other women ministers or more often deputy ministers served, one at a time, in typically female stereotyped ministries, usually of Health, of Labour and Welfare, or of Education and Culture. At present Israel has a record-size Cabinet without a single woman.

#### I. c) Women M.K.s in Knesseth Committees

The assignment of women M.K.s to the Knesseth Committees followed the typical pattern. Usually, no woman sitting on the two most important and powerful committees, that of Foreign Affairs and Security and that of Finance. Only in 1984 one woman succeeded to be assigned to the 21- member Foreign Affairs and Security Committee and one to the Finance Committee. By contrast, there were 4 women assigned to the Labour and Welfare Committee.

There never was a woman Speaker of the Knesseth.

### II. Local Government

#### II. a) Women members of municipal councils.

Whereas the low representation of women on national parliaments is very common, in many countries their representation is higher on intermediate state, provincial or regional elected bodies and even higher on local, municipal, government bodies. Israel, a small country, has no intermediate tier of government between the central and the local. Local or municipal elections took place in the following years, with the following results for women:

1950, 1955, 1959, 1965, 1969, 1973, 1978, 1983, 1989

Number of Local Authorities

61 80 98 98 96 98 99 101 104

:

Number of councillors

684 838 1008 1050 1070 1124 1173 1227 1350

elected: Number of women

20 34 36 32 39 51 65 93 118

elected: Percentage of women

4.2 4.1 3.6 3.1 3.6 4.5 5.5 7.6 8.6

elected: Number of councils

23 25 31 27 31 42 50 56 65

with women members: Percentage of councils

38 31 32 27 32 43 5 55 64

with women members:

Average number of women

1.26 1.36 1.16 1.18 1.26 1.12 1.30 1.66 1.8

elected to councils which contain women:

Obviously, in spite of the inching-up of the percentage of women among local councillors from 4.2 percent to 8.6 percent, their representation is still miserably small and more than one third of local councils still are male preserves. It is also not hard to imagine the difficulties of the majority of women local councillors in councils of small towns, who are each the only woman on her council.

## II. b) Women heads of local councils

In the 1975 the local government law was radically reformed and mayors (and chairpersons of local councils) started to be elected directly by the local citizens-simultaneously with the election of local councils.

This rendered the position of mayor the only directly elected political position in Israel;

apparently this also raised its prestige and considerably increased men's competition for it. Prior to this reform, between 1 and 3 women at a time had served as mayors or chairpersons of Jewish local councils, although with one exception all served in small towns of under 10,000 inhabitants. There also was the notable exception of a Christian Arab woman serving as mayor of her local authority.

Since the reform, not a single woman has ever been backed by a party as candidate for a mayoralty. In the recent 1989 local elections 29 women competed for mayoralties as heads of independent local lists; only one was elected mayor. (Interestingly 15 of these challengers succeeded to be elected as members of their councils.)

## II. c) Religious Councils

Parallel to Jewish local councils there exist another kind of local body, the Religious Councils, whose function is to look after the ritual needs of the community, to keep up synagogue, cemetery and perhaps also Mikweh (ritual bath). Formally it was supposed to be an elected body, but in practice it was an all-male appointed body, a sinecure for small party functionaries.

Only recently have Israeli women challenged this anomaly. First, several women councillors offered to serve but were turned down; then proper elections took place, and a brave woman lawyer was duly elected in spite of considerable pressure. The Orthodox establishment promptly refused to seat her; the struggle is continuing.

## III. The Higher Public Service

In Israel women are the majority - 58 percent - of those employed in the Public Service, as well as in the Jewish Agency. Yet in the higher managerial grades of the Public Service women are a mere 20 percent and in the Jewish Agency 21 percent. As to the four highest and most powerful grades of the Public Service, in the fourth grade women are 11 percent, in the third they are 7 percent and there are no women at all in the two highest grades. Equally rare are women among the heads of the main departments in the administration of the three large cities.

## IV. The State Sector of the Economy

In Israel the state has great economic power and is a major employer. The top managers

of state firms are political appointees. State Companies are all headed by men, usually retired high military officers. The same holds for the influential military industries, including the aviation industry.

Yet higher financial positions in the Public Service or Bank of Israel, the state bank, appear to open up for women. In 1982 women occupied the positions of Examiner of Bank, Bank of Israel; Assistant Commissioner, Income Tax and Property Tax Commission, Ministry of Finance; Assistant- Director, Economic Planning Authority, Ministry of Finance; Assistant Controller of Foreign Exchange, Bank of Israel.

#### V. The Military and the Police.

I have already mentioned the Israeli Defence Force's central and extremely powerful position; although its policy is controlled by the civilian Government, the armed forces' leadership affects the daily lives of a very large part of the Israeli population. And here women's influence is absent. The authority of the highest women officers is restricted to the women's corp, where some have tried to use their power to improve the conditions and opportunities of women recruits. The situation in the Police is similar; policewomen are largely segregated in traffic control and in clerical jobs, and women officers' authority is restricted to policewomen.

#### VI. Women's Position in the Judiciary.

The Israeli Judiciary poses a curious contradictory picture: even during the Mandatory period Jewish women had never been as excluded from the law as women were in North America. But, whereas previously women judges were appointed mainly to the lower courts, there are now a number of women judges in the regional courts and there is even a woman judge on the Supreme Court. This process - which is similar to what has happened in the Federal Republic of Germany - may have been helped along by the fact that more and more women have studied law and are practicing it, and there simply may be more qualified women around..(This does not mean that Israeli women lawyers no longer meet similar obstacles in their careers as women lawyers anywhere.)

Yet at the same time there exists by law an entire category of courts, the Rabbinical Courts, which adjudicate cases of so-called "personal law" or family law, according to the

orthodox interpretation of the Halachah; on these courts not only sit no women judges but their becoming judges is expressly ruled out. Women cannot even testify in these courts. Shulamith Aloni has recently pointed out the absurdity of the woman now serving on the highest court of the land being denied carrying out her profession in one of the lowest! Yet these low courts that exclude women from judging and testifying, deal with many of women's most painful problems, according to a law that predates by nearly 2000 years the ideal of gender equality before the law.

#### VII. The Histadruth - Women on the Central Bodies

The Histadruth is the extremely powerful umbrella organization of the individual blue-collar and white-collar unions. The basic conditions of their wages, salaries, fringe benefits and working hours are decided for most employed Israelis through periodic collective bargaining leading to "group contracts", which are binding on employers, employees and the Government, and in which delegations of centrally appointed union representatives play a crucial role.

Unfortunately women, who comprise nearly half of the Histadruth membership, are nearly absent from the leadership of most individual unions, and are poorly represented on the federation's central bodies: The two top positions of Secretary-General and his deputy are always occupied by men. In the last Histadruth elections for the first time a woman was a candidate for the office of Secretary General. The highest committee is the Central Committee, wherein in 1987 out of 42 members 6 were women, namely, 14 percent, and on the next ranking Executive Committee, only 15 out of 196 were women - not quite 8 percent. An example of the harmful effects for women of their relative powerlessness in the Histadruth, were the recent negotiations concerning the introduction of the 5 day working week in the Public Service. Although the "Sh'dula", the Israeli Women's Network, had formulated a document on women's reservations and demands, the all-male union delegation of the large white-collar union (that has a 50 percent female membership) accepted the employers' suggestions and accepted them without any discussion despite their ill-effect women employees with young children. Their own union had let them down.

#### VII. The Media and the Academy.

In the Government supervised and supported Media, most women are either reading what others (men) have written, or work on issues considered "soft". Neither Radio nor Television were ever headed by a woman. Of the many daily newspapers only one ever had a woman editor-in-chief. As to the Universities, suffice it to mention, that although women now form half the student body, as undergraduates as well as graduate students, in the Hebrew University, Israel's oldest and most prestigious university, only 7 percent of full professors are women, and fewer are deans and higher administrators.

I shall not deal here with women's economic power, in spite of its interconnectedness with political power, as this will be discussed elsewhere in this volume.

5. So far a very cursory description of the relative powerlessness of Israeli women in political institutions and in most State-connected ones.

The question has now to be asked: Is this so very limited power stationary, in decline or growing? My conclusion that it is on the increase, that it has good chances to grow further. This growth is, however, not guaranteed, apparently because of the forces that have prevented Israeli women up to now from gaining more political power. These are as strong as ever, growing, and may - if unchecked - eventually become destructive to whatever gains Israeli women have made over the last 15 years.

The relative growth of women's power, as well as the good chances for further growth, are due to the organization of an effective women's network, and of the formulation of a women's agenda that is basically feminist. Both did not exist 10 years ago.

This network is now capable of mobilizing wide coalitions of women, of party activists, of women M.K.s and women local councillors, of members of the old women's organizations, of activists of the various feminist organizations and self-help institutions, around campaigns of a clearly feminist character. These range from support for party activists who pressure their male leadership to place women in realistic places on their slates for Knesseth elections, of developing and canvassing a women's list of demands from local authorities, to a week-long, country-wide campaign against violence against women, to supporting a demonstration of Agunoth (women denied divorce). or organizing meetings of Arab and Jewish women for the purpose of exchanging views and

suggestions for fostering peace. Understandably, not all the campaigns will be supported by the same wall-to-wall coalition.

6. All this is happening in the face of very serious obstacles, some of them common to most societies, some specific to Israel. Before discussing them it is important to consider the background to the image of gender roles in Israel. There exists an extremely traditionalist, orthodox public, which considers sharply divided gender roles and the centrality of males in religious and in public life as God-given and as an integral part of Jewish values. A larger part of the Israeli public supports the - supposedly modern - "super-woman" ideal of the perfect wife and mother (3 children at least), who is solely responsible for household and childcare (and is grateful to her husband for a little help); at the same time she is also a "secondary breadwinner", and always ready to undertake voluntary work. This ideal is a formidable obstacle in the struggle for Israeli women's access to power. It is eagerly used by men, the incumbents of economic as well as political power, in order to dissuade women from seriously competing with them. It causes strong guilt feelings in women, and prevents them from even entertaining the possibility of demanding the equal division with men of housework and parenting, the work as well as the responsibility. So-called protective laws remain on the books, and no provisions are made to facilitate equal parenting.

In the past the large women's organizations had not pursued the basic feminist goals of abolishing stereotyped social gender roles, and of empowering women for the struggle to erase all forms of discrimination and oppression of women. Most of their membership subscribed and many still subscribe to the super-woman ideal.

Recently encouraging signs of a gradual rising of feminist consciousness and increased assertiveness appear both in the older women's organizations and in the political parties. A somewhat more practical anti-discrimination activity is presently carried out by institutions and office holders appointed by the State to further gender equality. Still the "super-woman" ideal is far from dead. This ideal was a serious obstacle to women's empowerment in some other countries too. Apparently in Israel it has been strengthened, and its demise postponed, by the unresolved nationalistic tensions and the centrality of the military. Women are made to consider themselves as being ignorant concerning the

most crucial national interest - that of defence - and thus unqualified to deal with this most important part of politics. Men's longer military service and lengthy reserve duties, and especially the physical danger that they face, are used to reinforce the traditional view of women's moral obligation to take on without complaint all of household and child care as well as other care work.

Another serious obstacle to the empowerment of Israeli women is the weakness of a democratic civic national consciousness, that is due to the non-separation between Nation and Religion, and the non-separation between State and Religious institutions. This makes possible the continuation of the unequal, and often very harmful and humiliating treatment of women in the Rabbinical courts. These State-licensed Rabbis/ Judges gravely interfere with women's privacy, limit their autonomy, condone violence against women in marriage, and generally treat them as a separate and inferior species. The women's movement has to work out urgently suggestions for the immediate establishment of civil marriage and divorce - as an alternative option, of course. Unfortunately many women have not yet freed themselves from believing the threat of the minority Orthodox Establishment, that the institution of civil marriage and divorce in Israel would necessarily "split the Jewish people". It is interesting to note that a wide coalition of women's organizations recently demanded the establishment of a separate, civil court for cases of family violence.

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