

BATTLING THE MYTHS: WOMEN'S STUDIES IN ISRAEL

Marilyn Safir and Kathleen Fragen

Les auteurs font remarquer l'importance des études sur la femme en Israël. Elles dénoncent les mythes populaires de l'attitude progressiste de l'Etat envers les droits de la femme, en analysant leur situation désavantageuse dans l'enseignement, le monde du travail et le mariage. Bien que le climat politique incertain et les lois religieuses discriminatoires barrent le progrès, le féminisme suscite peu à des changements dans les lois et la société. Les programmes d'études sur la femme offerts dans les universités d'Haïfa et de Jérusalem sont, à cet égard, d'importants facteurs d'évolution.

Israel has a particularly strong need for education in Women's Studies. Outside the country's borders people think of Israel as the epitome of women's rights – because women participate in the army, because of myths about the kibbutz woman and Golda Meir's election as Prime Minister. Inside Israel some of these same myths also exist. Women are still unaware that inequalities in educational and occupational opportunities continue.

Recent research reveals that in Israel both young girls and female college candidates do not perform as well as their male counterparts on intelligence tests.¹ Furthermore, the discrepancies in scores show up at an earlier age in Israel than in the United States. American research demonstrates that if differences appear, young males score high on performance and math tests while young females score high on verbal tests. In Israel, however, males scored higher in both subjects. This may result from teachers (and parents) reinforcing male academic progress over female. Without stimulation for education, women will be forced to remain at a distinct disadvantage in modern society.

Undoubtedly, the position of women in Israel is influenced by the position of women in traditional Judaism – the "woman of virtue" is supposed to be a devoted mother, a loyal and modest wife, a practical and energetic housekeeper.

However, with the reality of economic strife in Israel, more and more women are joining the workforce. In 1984, women comprised 38% of the workforce, although the majority of women work half-time. However, more than 76% of the women in Israel with more than sixteen years of education work full-time.

Laws originally designed to protect women in the workplace now are used to discriminate against them. Women aren't allowed to work at night unless the employer fulfills certain requirements. These requirements usually involve additional expenses. Thus, employing women for night work is not cost-effective – unless they are nurses. A woman cannot be fired during pregnancy. In addition, pregnant women receive three months' leave with full pay and their positions must be left open for them to return to for at least a year. In addition, as well as the right to work one hour less daily, women with school-aged children are entitled to a total of two weeks' paid leave to care for sick children. These seemingly-enlightened laws have back-fired: women are more expensive to employ than men.

Laws preventing sex discrimination do exist. However, women are often unaware of them and aren't always aware that

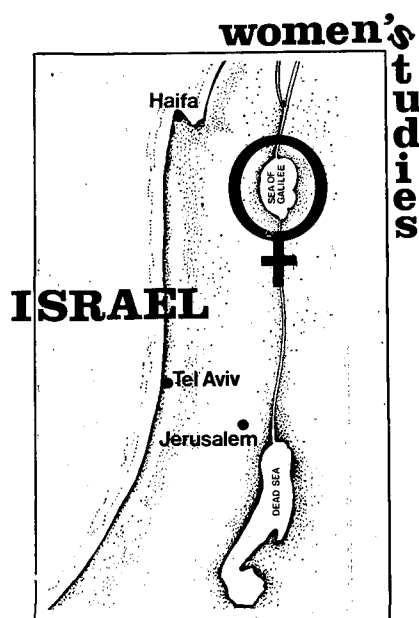
they are being discriminated against. Thus they are prevented from seeking redress.

Without the opportunity to learn about the Israeli woman's status in Israeli society – the myths that surround her and the reality – her status will not improve, nor will the laws and policies that reinforce discrimination be changed.

In order to educate the community and help improve the role of women in Israel, the University of Haifa established a Women's Studies Program and is presently trying to institute a Center for Women's Studies. The Center will coordinate and encourage research, teaching and development programs relating to the history, psychology and socio-economic position of women, particularly in the context of Jewish tradition in Israeli society. Because of government cutbacks in university budgets, the Program was supported by a donation from Pioneer Women, U.S.A./Naamat, Israel. Unfortunately, the Program must continue to exist on donations until Israel's economy improves.

In 1983 the University began its interdisciplinary Women's Studies Program, directed by Marilyn Safir. In the first year one hundred students registered for the Program's three basic courses. Thirty of these students declared Women's Studies as their minor. As a result of the Women's Studies Program various disciplines within the University now offer courses which deal specifically with women – psychology, political science, history, etc. They are intended to give students a general awareness of women's issues.

The following fourteen courses were offered during the Program's first year: the Psychology of Sex Differences; the Struggle for Women's Rights as a Political Movement; the Status of Women in Israel; the Position of Women in Industry; Human Sexuality; the Jewish Family from North Africa; Similarities and Differences: Equality and Inequality between the Sexes on the Kibbutz; Women in Changing Societies; Theory and Research on the Family; Treatment of Women in Distress



(i.e. refugee centers for battered women); Women in Colonial America; Protest and Reaction in Israeli Politics; and Life Transitions. An additional ten courses are being added for the current academic year.

In addition to teaching, the faculty of the Women's Studies Program is involved with a number of interdisciplinary research projects. Amira Dotan, Commander-in-Chief of the Israeli Women's Army Corps, requested that research be done under the auspices of the Women's Studies Program regarding the Women's Army Corps (i.e. how the army affects the status of women in society). The Program's faculty is also conducting research concerning women in the labour force, women voters, and nonsexual curriculum development.

Marilyn Safir, the Program's Director, recently sent letters to researchers throughout the country requesting information on published articles, working papers, and student research papers, including masters and doctoral theses, both in Hebrew and English, relating to Women's Studies. An annotated bibliography based on the information received will be prepared in English, along with translations of Arabic and Hebrew abstracts for distribution both within Israel and abroad.

Women's Studies, in an academic framework, was non-existent in Israel until the 1st Interdisciplinary Congress held at the University of Haifa in 1981. This Congress brought together top-notch researchers from Israel and abroad, giving them an opportunity to meet and form networks as well as to improve the status of Women's Studies as an academic field. As a result of the Congress, the Women's Studies Program at the University of Haifa was born, as well as a program in Sex and Gender, directed by Professor Galia Golan of the Department of Political Science, at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

And this year, for the first time in twenty years, the American Jewish Congress, Israeli-American Dialogue included women's issues in their program. The program, "Woman as Jew, Jew as Woman," featured such internationally-known speakers as Betty Freidan, Cynthia Ozick, Blue Greenberg, and Elizabeth Holzman, along with other known Israeli researchers and feminists. Also, for the first time in the history of this Dialogue, an agreement was reached that in future a dialogue concerning women's issues will be held every two years.

Consciousness-raising, conferences, networks, and dialogues do contribute to improving women's status. In 1984, ten years after Malcha Maon, then of the University of Haifa, Department of Psychology, published the results of her MA research thesis on the negative effects of Hebrew books given young children in the Israeli school system,² Education Ministry Director-General Eliezer Shmueli issued a directive banning stereotyping of female and male characteristics, except biological ones. Maon's thesis, incorporating literature from one of the earliest feminist projects, begun in 1971 at the University of Haifa, showed that heroines of children's books cry, are continually in distress, and are constantly concerned about staying clean. Heroes, on the other hand, are portrayed as strivers, achievers, adventurers and occasionally mischievous – but only in a positive light. According to the Ministry of Education, in future children's books should describe the activities and achievements of women in various fields alongside those of men. Schools should encourage pupils to express equality in school activities.

The feminist movement, furthermore, has successfully created an atmosphere enabling collaborating evidence to be dropped as a prerequisite for opening court cases regarding rape. Shelters for battered women and rape crisis centers are now operative in all of Israel's major cities. In addition to providing a twenty-four hour crisis hot line, these centers hold training sessions for police, social and hospital workers, and provide an outreach program to kibbutzim and the Israel Army, educating women about rape prevention. The rape centers and homes for battered women are funded mainly by donations. In Haifa and Herzlia the municipality also provides financial support to these centers.

Battering is considered more than merely a social problem. Police not only open files on batterers, they also prosecute them. Sentences handed down against rapists and batterers have increased both in number and severity. Even rape within marriage is now being prosecuted.

Because of coalition governments and religion, changing legislation in Israel is a difficult task. The fact that neither the two major political parties have been able to win a majority in Parliament, results in the religious parties being able to wield power far outweighing their actual representation. It is quite a paradox that with only

10% of Israel's population being orthodox, religious laws govern the general population in matters concerning marriage, divorce and family. Thus, when the Likud was elected in 1977 they agreed to remove the legality of abortions on social clauses.

Only the Jewish man has the right to sue for divorce. A man may leave his wife, openly take up residence with an unmarried woman, and father children by her – still the wife has no right to file for divorce. If the man, however, can prove that his wife is having an affair with another man, not only does he have contest grounds for divorce, but the woman's claim for child custody is thereby jeopardized. Although according to Israeli divorce law the wife receives 50% of all property acquired during the marriage, this settlement also may be jeopardized if the rabbinical courts deem her a "wayward wife."

The current stalemate between the two major political parties has caused women throughout Israel to speculate that legislation concerning women's rights will further deteriorate as the more extreme religious parties demand total legal responsibility for laws concerning marriage, divorce and the family.

Israeli women continue to demonstrate, reminding national leaders that we will not tolerate a deterioration in our status.

¹M.P. Safir, E. Gurmyseter, and D. Biton, "An investigation of the disproportional representation of boys and girls identified as gifted in two major cities in Israel," Second World Congress on the Gifted, San Francisco, August, 1977, and A. Amiah Lieblich, "Sex differences in intelligence test performances of Jewish children in Israel," in *Women's Worlds: A New Scholarship*, ed. M.P. Safir, M.S. Mednick, et al. (New York: Praeger, in press). See also Safir, Navon and Levi (1981).

²Malcha Maon, "The influence of stereotypes in Hebrew textbooks and television on Israeli children's behavior." Unpublished master's thesis. The Hebrew University, 1974.

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