

## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Women's Parliament: The Israeli Experience**

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**The Women's Parliament in Israel is a platform for politics from a feminist perspective, established in November 1989. The article discusses the aims, activities and achievements of this framework on the background of political marginalization, economic discrimination, religious oppression, and cultural objectification of women. The Parliament strives to raise awareness of this reality; to change public discourse and policies; to support women competing over leadership positions. The article also addresses the financial and organizational barriers faced by the Women Parliament's endeavors to bring about fundamental change in the gendered power structure. Consequently, it examines the idea of establishing Women's Parliaments around the world, as a means for global gender change.**

**Key words:** women's parliament; political feminism; patriarchal society; gendered power-relations; women's marginalization; women's representation

### **Introduction**

The State of Israel presents a conspicuous example of patriarchal society, characterized by a "man's culture", primarily due to the fact that it is a country that deals extensively with military activities and where the military enjoys prominent status. Men's structured advantage in Israeli society is reflected in all walks of life, in the military, industry, education and culture. As a central system in Israeli society, the army serves as a framework that trains and channels man to leading positions in the Israeli economy and politics. I suggest that in the militaristic reality of Israel, feminine discourse and women's struggle for equality and partnership assume special importance and pertinence. However, its potential for a gender change in human society exceeds the Israeli context.

The Women's Parliament is a framework for alternative and critical thinking and discussion with regard to the combative-male culture, the capitalist economy and the patriarchal society in Israel. The experience of the Women's Parliament in Israel, which was founded in 1999, will be used to examine the processes, implications and chances entailed in establishing similar frameworks beyond Israel. Among the assumptions on which the discussion is based: Achieving social-political-gender changes necessitates intensive, continuous and diverse activity of women, gradually joined by men, until full and equal partnership; the activity must relate to different areas of discrimination and oppression of women and of other groups; it requires the collective support

for women competing for positions; it demands the commitment of the latter to the wellbeing of all, women and men, and to feminist values, once they reach influential positions.

The Women's Parliament will be presented as a model for feminist-political debate that aspires to change the hegemonic discourse and to develop social tools suited to the feminist-humanist value system. I will use some of the Women's Parliament's events to demonstrate how it challenges the gendered structure and the patriarchal order in Israel. I will also discuss the role of Women's Parliament in struggles for women's representation and rights and will analyze the implications of the Women's Parliament's activity.

### **Women's Parliament – background, goals and processes**

The Women's Parliament is a "platform for politics from another perspective, for critical and feminist discussion of the prevailing policy and public discourse in Israel", as defined by the founders.<sup>1</sup> The Parliament was established in November 1999 by SHIN Movement, for Equal Representation of Women; HN (Herzliya<sup>2</sup> Women); Friedrich Ebert Foundation<sup>3</sup>; Beit Berl College; and Herzliya municipality. Since its establishment, the activity of the

<sup>1</sup> See books of abstracts of Women's Parliament sessions 1999-2010.

<sup>2</sup> Herzliya is a town in the center of Israel, sited on the Mediterranean coast.

<sup>3</sup> See website of Friedrich Ebert Foundation [www.fes.org.il](http://www.fes.org.il)

Women's Parliament has been accompanied by a steering committee. The committee comprises some twenty members, whose most prominent characteristics are professionalism, established socio-economic status and feminist activity. Among the committee members are politicians, journalists, women from the academia and from the field of education. One third of the committee members are North African and Arab women.

The Parliament holds six sessions a year, with each session addressing a focal subject currently on the public agenda (national or local), from the perspective of women and from the broad social viewpoint. Participants of the discussions are mainly women and few men, with professional, activist, political and other backgrounds relevant to the topic at issue in each session. The Parliament's sessions are held around the country, in collaboration with women's organizations and social organizations, both local and national, according to the topic covered by each session. The Parliament's activity was, until recently, facilitated by financial assistance from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation<sup>4</sup> (which funded the mailing of invitations, website and annual books of abstracts), the hosting local authority (which provides the venue, an auditorium seating some 150-200, sound equipment and refreshments) and the support of Beit Berl Academic College<sup>5</sup> (which provided logistic and mailing support). All the activities of the Women's Parliament (except for the website management), including organizing the sessions and participation in the discussions, are done on a voluntary basis. The 72 sessions held to date have been attended by more than 15,000 women (and some hundreds of men). Most of the participants in the sessions are Jewish, secular, aged 40 and above. The sessions held in Arab towns are attended mainly by traditional women aged around 30, many men and children, as well as by many Jewish women.

Two main political events provided the impetus for the establishment of the Women's Parliament, the elections for local municipalities in 1998 and the elections to the Knesset (Israel parliament) elections in 1999. In the local elections, two women were elected as city mayors for the first time since the establishment of the State. The success of the two was attributed to the ongoing feminist activity in the Sharon region, orchestrated by SHIN Movement since 1989. This activity entailed the organization of many social gatherings and public seminars to discuss the goals of the feminist

struggle in Israel and the world; demonstrations against courts in the region for their lenient rulings in the sentencing of rapists and women batterers; support for women running for positions within political and public bodies (such as the municipalities, the Knesset and the General workers' union). Following this activity and that of other organizations, in the 1998 elections five women were elected to the city council of Netanya, a major city in the Sharon region (as compared with a single woman in all the preceding election campaigns), and a woman was elected mayor.

The feminist networking and grass root work in Herzliya was particularly interesting and successful. It was linked to the ongoing activity of local women's organizations. Moreover, it appears that the women's leadership courses, organized by SHIN Movement and HN Association, since 1997, had a conspicuous impact and far-reaching results. The influence of this activity reached all parts and sectors of the city, religious and secular people, left and right, women and men. When a female member of Herzliya city council, called Yael German, announced her candidacy for mayor, the women's organizations, and mainly the graduates of the Women's Leadership courses, rallied to her support, and assisted in her campaign. After a run-off election German was elected mayor of Herzliya and immediately following her election she established the Women's department. It was the first administrative framework of its kind in Israel, operating routinely and extensively within the local municipality to promote gender awareness and social equity in the city.

The success of women's leadership courses in enhancing political awareness, women's solidarity and willingness to support women running for political positions, has been discussed in feminist research for the last two decades. Many studies pointed out the importance of women's social networks in promoting feminist awareness and women's personal and collective empowerment. An interesting example for these processes is connected to literacy programs (Stromquist 1990; Patel & Dighe 1997; Milligan 2004; Lauren 2007; Hertzog 2011). These studies have indicated the poor achievements of most literacy projects in terms of their proclaimed goals. Nevertheless, it appears that "the women's social space", that emerged in the contexts of literacy programs contributed significantly to mutual support, to increasing women's solidarity and even to the involvement of women in social-national struggles, such as occurred in the Maoist revolution in Nepal (Manchanda 1999, 2004; Gautam, Banskota & Manchanda 2001).

The success of Yael German, who had previously been active in women's organizations, with the assistance of many women, aroused the hope that this success could be leveraged to achieve a significant breakthrough also in women's representation in the Knesset. Subsequently, a women's party was founded, "Ytzug Shaveh" [Equal Representation], with the blessing of Yael German, by several activists from SHIN Movement and HN Association, as well as many other women from Herzliya, who had supported German in her campaign for mayor. The party started its activity close to the elections and lacked financial resources. The central activity

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<sup>4</sup> Recently the relationship with the Ebert Foundation and its funding have terminated, following the Parliament's support of a woman who competed over leadership of the Teachers' Union, against the male head of the union for the last 12 years. The foundation blamed the Women's Parliament for getting them involved in elections. The Women Parliament's steering committee clarified that they would not give up their "raison d'être", namely supporting women who run for leading positions, even if that will entail losing financial support.

<sup>5</sup> Following the Ebert Foundation's letter to partner organizations against the Women's Parliament, Beit Berl College terminated its partnership and funding. Later on the Israeli association for feminist studies and gender research has joined the Women's Parliament as a new partner.

soon encountered difficulties, and the party was largely ignored by the media. Ultimately the members decided not to run for election.

In light of the grave outcomes and failure to enter the Knesset, as an organized women's power that expresses women's voices and represents the various interests of women in Israel, shortly after the elections a decision was made to establish the Women's Parliament. It was planned to become an alternative platform, where feminist and gender issues, relevant to women in Israel, will be addressed and critical views relating to women's exclusion, their widespread discrimination and silencing their voices, will gain prominence. The original idea was to establish a "shadow government", but due to the reservations of some of the members it was decided to establish the "Women's Parliament".

The establishment of the Women's Parliament as an alternative framework to the institutionalized parliament expresses defiance of the political-gender reality in Israel. It is related to the ongoing struggle for the representation of women and women's rights and against their discrimination in all spheres of life, dating back to pre-State times. One of the main expressions of women's collective weakness in Israel is the poor rate of their representation in all government bodies.<sup>6</sup> The rate of representation of women in the Knesset has never exceeded 20% and until 1999 no more than 14 women (out of 120, i.e. 10.2%) had served as Knesset members (in one term). In all governments in Israel to date, only 12 women have served as ministers (out of 216 ministers, i.e. 5.6%). In this respect Israel is ranked 107 in the world. The average rate of women out of all city council members in Israel is only 11%. Only five women are currently the heads of local or regional councils and, as written above, only in 1998 were two women elected to mayors for the first time. The fact that in the pre-State period (1944 elections) the rate of women's representation in the elected body (assembly of representatives) was 15%, a rate nearly attained only in the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset (14%), highlights the significance of women's marginality and political weakness in Israel since the establishment of the State and until today.

Furthermore, the fact that in the Israeli political arena, which to a large extent is based on parties that represent sectoral interests, there is no women's party, underscores the implications of the lack of women's collective representation. In other words, the women's sector, which constitutes half the population of Israel, has not been represented in the Knesset by a party, since the first Knesset (when Wizo party, headed by Rachel Kagan, participated). The severe implications of the absence of women's political representation is heightened due to the numerous and basic common interests of this population. Women experience common types of discrimination and oppression, among

others with regard to wages, limited opportunities for occupational promotion, physical and sexual violence, discrimination by the religious authorities and the army, and more (Swirski & Safir 1991; Herzog 1996; Abu-Baker 1998; Hassan 1999; Binyamin 2006; Mazar 2008; Hertzog 2010).

During the course of 13 years of its activity the Parliament has held 72 sessions (as of July 2012), which were conducted in urban and rural towns, Jewish and Arab, from the south, to the far north. Some of the sessions were held at regional councils, in academic institutions, such as Beit Berl College and Al-Qasemi Muslim College, at the Women's Prison and IDF base. Most of the participants in these events were feminist and social activists, women from the hosting locale as well as women from the center of the country.

Holding the Parliament sessions all over the country is a way of spreading the feminist concept in all its parts, offering numerous and divergent groups of women the opportunity to listen to and interact with prominent women with radical approaches, unique expertise and commitment to the feminist struggle. The founders had hoped that a "travelling" parliament would mobilize and bind women throughout the country to the struggle for equality. This would facilitate a fruitful encounter between women with different and even conflicting opinions from groups with different identities and affiliations. Thus a sense of solidarity and affinity would arise between women from different and even hostile groups, creating awareness of a common interest to all women in society, despite the divisions, alienation and hostility fostered by the patriarchal regime.

The Parliament founders assumed also that the women's engagement in any issue on the public agenda, including issues relating to society in general, would clarify the relevance of the feminist point of view to any social-economic issue that concerns all parts of society. These expectations indeed materialized with time; the Parliament sessions dealt with a wide range of issues and stressed the feminist aspect in each subject: state budget, minimum wage, education and welfare policies, issues of peace, war, media and economics, employment, violence, crime and terrorism, beauty contests and modeling, prostitution, women trafficking and pornography, military service, capital and politics, entrepreneurship, sport, higher education, ecology, custody of young children, and more. Thus, the Parliament created prominence for the feminist angle in public debate and for original and critical positions of women from divergent backgrounds. The Parliament sessions also provided open and explicit public support to women who contended for public and political positions, such as: support for the contenders for head of the Teachers' Union (in the elections of 2006 and 2011), support for Colette Avital, who ran for state president (in 2006) and for Tzipi Livni, in her bid for prime minister (in 2009).

A further assumption of the Parliament's activists was that its discussions will clarify that the gendered segregation is intentionally constructed by the patriarchal hegemony and is neither a "natural" or "coincidental" nor a "cultural"

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<sup>6</sup> Source of data: The Israel Institute for Democracy (latest revision: 3/1/2010): <http://www.idi.org.il/BreakingNews/Pages/289.aspx>  
Knesset, Research and Information Center (dated 2/12/2009): <http://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/data/pdf/m02432.pdf>

phenomenon. This state of affairs serves men in all levels of society, in leading society as a whole, as well as in the family and community. This understanding suggests that the patriarchal culture generates gender clashes and works against the profound interests of the two genders. To make this understanding the foundation for joint activity of men and women, the latter have to become aware of their discrimination, and of the need to cooperate in order to overcome the barriers of separation that have been imprinted in their lives and their minds.

### **Confronting male hegemony: the Parliament's struggles and achievements**

Analyzing twelve years of the Parliament's activity, several accomplishments can be pointed out with regard to the goals set by the founders. The Parliament created prominence of gifted women who made unique contributions in terms of social and professional achievements in public life in Israel. More than 400 speakers presented original insights, personal testimonies and inspiring interpretations in the Parliament's sessions. They presented a wide range of women's voices, from the professional fields, academia, politics, business, sport, social activity, the arts and more. The speakers were from diverse backgrounds and affiliations: Jewish, Arabs, North African, Ashkenazi, veterans, new immigrants, young, senior, religious, secular, lesbians, right-wing, left-wing, and others. They demonstrated the fact that women in Israel have the need, desire and ability to voice unique and original opinions and to influence the reality. Moreover, the Parliament's discussions exposed the mechanisms and manipulations of excluding women in governing agencies; pointed to the implications of women's discrimination and deprivation; and offered conceptual and pragmatic options for changing society and promoting gender and social equality. The multi-voiced and multi-perspective discussions clarified the understanding that "the personal is the political", and that problems identified with any specific group of women are relevant in various ways to other groups. The Parliament created an open and unique public forum, bringing together different and diverse groups of women, from various ends of the political spectrum, with different levels of education and occupation, different age groups and the like. These gatherings created an atmosphere of solidarity and sense of power; they strengthened the social bonds and encouraged joint initiatives among activists and holders of positions.

The Parliament was the first to raise public discussion on issues such as trafficking in women, prostitution and pornography, custody of young children, women and gynecology, gender and the state budget, gender and teachers' organizations, women's candidacy for the State president and others. In these discussions relevant information was offered, different viewpoints were raised and the speakers demanded that steps will be taken by the authorities to overcome gender discrimination. In several sessions harsh criticism was leveled against power centers; exposed their corruption, oppression and discriminating practices; and condemned the preservation of social injustice and gaps inflicted by the capitalist governments. The wide distribution of printed and

internet invitations and annual books of abstracts, sent to public and academic libraries, to policy makers and to people in power centers, serves to introduce crucial issues to the wider public. The titles of topics and viewpoints, as phrased in the invitations, serve to reflect the speakers' (and the Parliament's) critical messages in advance. More than once, even before the events took place, responses of enthusiastic support were received from women on the one hand, while on the other hand anger was expressed by men in power positions and by misogynistic groups. Some of the men, who considered the topic of discussion or any of the discussants as harmful for their interests, tried to prevent the events from taking place or tried to dictate their format.

The Parliament's discussions, conferences and other activities introduced various initiatives and coalitions. Thus, for example, following the Parliament's discussion on prostitution, trafficking in women and pornography, SHIN, in collaboration with the Movement for New Masculinity, held three conferences dealing with policy related to these issues, hosting State officials. Also, following the session on pornography, a coalition of women and social organizations was formed to take action against pornography. This activity resulted in a law that was passed in the Knesset against the broadcast of pornographic programs on TV.

Since its beginning the Women's Parliament has nurtured a range of partnerships. Its most prominent partnership is the one with local municipalities, which contribute to the planning, financing and organizing the events. This partnership takes place through the collaboration with mayors' advisors on women's issues and their women's councils. In many of the sessions local women's organizations also participate in planning and organizing the events. Often the Women's Parliament cooperates with social organizations, according to the topic of the session. For instance, when ecology was discussed, environmental protection organizations participated; organizations for women's rights at work participated in discussing employment issues; the Parliament collaborated with several women's organizations and with the "New Masculinity" group when it discussed feminism and leadership.

The Parliament's discussions concerning Jewish-Arab relations in general and women's status in the two sectors spawned a network of women leaders, Jewish and Arab, called Anwar (lights, in Hebrew), that strived to empower women in Israel and to promote equality between the groups. Anwar organized seminars and conferences in Jewish and Arab locales, in which issues relating to the "status of women" in the different social-religious groups were discussed; women's narratives of the 1948 Jewish-Palestinian war and the Second Lebanon War were brought up. In 2005 Anwar's activity focused on creating a common women's network in one of the poorest villages in the country. This cooperation gave rise to the Parliament session on "Women against Arms", which condemned the wide-spread use of arms by the men of the village in particular, and in Israeli society and in the world in general.

Following discussion of the Parliament in a town widely inhabited by the 1950s immigrants from Yemen, about removing children from their parents since the "Children of Yemen" ordeal until today, a coalition of women's and social organizations was established. It campaigned for changing the welfare policy with regard to "children and youth at risk", demanding to transfer the state resources from the institutions' system to the family and the community. In September 2005 the Women's Parliament initiated a coalition of women's organizations for mothers and children, which worked against changing the law of "Tender age Custody" which stipulates that children until 6 years of age of divorcing parents, will remain with the mother. The coalition managed to stimulate broad public debate and criticism of the intention of Minister of Justice at that time Tzipi Livni to revoke the law, and succeeded (thus far) to prevent the change in the law.

The Women's Parliament participated in a coalition of feminist organizations before the 2006 elections and initiated a session where "social economic principles" were presented by members of the coalition to the representatives of the contending parties. The Parliament initiated a campaign for election of the country's first woman president. Six suitable women-candidates for presidency were presented at a session organized by the Parliament. At the end of the event MK Colette Avital announced her candidacy, and the Parliament provided its support throughout her campaign.

A further accomplishment of the Women's Parliament's activities is the establishment of a "Young Women's Parliament" in 2010, in collaboration with the City of Bat Yam. This framework emerged from the understanding of the crucial need to convey the feminist agenda to female teenagers, encouraging them to join the feminist struggle for gender equality. To date six events have been held, in which hundreds of high school students, girls who dropped out, Jewish and Bedouin, members of "4girls" (website for young girls) and others, participated. The discussions underscored the empowering impact of these gatherings, overcoming borders of place, status, ethnic/religious backgrounds and the like. The opinions and narratives that were presented were fascinating. Moreover, the young women's criticism, facing the establishment's representatives, demonstrated their need and ability to express their views on issues relating to their lives.

The Parliament's accomplishments attest to the great potential embodied in this kind of feminist activity and framework, in Israel and globally, as a means to formulate and realize human, social and feminist goals. The way is long and arduous, among others because it is based on joint work with many groups sometimes with conflicting positions that compete over limited resources. Often it would seem that the activity has little chance of bringing any change, also because the promotion and realization of ideas and goals hinge on the brokerage of the media that ignores them.

Below I will describe several sessions of the Women's Parliament and analyze the events that occurred during and

around them, as examples of the social processes and drama which they generated. I will also discuss the potential contained in a Women's Parliament for promoting discourse and recognition of the importance of gender equality in Israel and in the wider world. Nevertheless, I will also elaborate on the hardships of the Parliament's activities which impeded further accomplishments.

### **The law of tender age custody<sup>7</sup>**

The term "tender age custody" refers to a clause in the law that stipulates that children up to age 6 will remain in the custody of their mothers, when their parents get divorced (except for cases of evident harm done to them by their mother). Following men's organizations' activity around the world, men in Israel began to demand that the clause should be abolished and, instead, a legal procedure will take place, in which the child's custody will be determined according to "the minor's wellbeing" or, alternatively, "joint custody" should be enforced.

In November 2005, an emergency session was organized in response to the launching of the "Schnit Committee". The committee was appointed by Minister of Justice at that time Tzipi Livni to examine the existing laws relating to parental responsibility in divorce cases. It was expected to provide recommendations regarding changes in the custody of young children and to introduce new legal arrangements with regard to parental responsibility of divorcing couples. Opposition to the change in the law, led by the Women's Parliament, resulted in founding a coalition of many women's organizations. The main claim raised was that canceling the clause of tender age custody would lead to protracted and costly litigation over the guardianship of children, which would harm mostly the weaker parties in the conflict, namely the children and in most cases also the women.

On 7 November 2005 the Parliament held a session in Tel Aviv. The discussion opened with a presentation from a personal perspective of the subject "Parents and children in the shadow of divorce", by a father and activist in the Movement for New Masculinity, and by a divorced mother. Following this, experts presented their opinions. Dr. Rona Shuz, a scholar of law from an Israeli College, emphasized the implications of canceling the custody of young children from the perspective of the child's wellbeing. She explained that canceling the clause would lead to instability and economic hardships because legal litigation between the parents will dramatically increase. As married women's status is economically inferior the clause of Tender Age Custody serves to balance the situation. If the law is cancelled, women will be easily threatened with losing custody of the children and will be willing to reach a bad divorce settlement just to keep their children. Referring to custody cases in the US, Shuz explained that in most cases the courts decide eventually to leave the children with the mother, because she is the "main caring person" over small children. Moreover, she contended that even in the current situation, the Israeli courts award custody of the child to the father when it is

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<sup>7</sup> See: *Book of abstracts of Women's Parliament Sessions 2006*.

proven that this is in the child's best interests. Hence there is no need to change the law, which would lead to an increase in legal claims and to weakening of woman in divorce proceedings.

Prof. Smadar Lavie, a social anthropologist and social activist, elaborated on the connection between parenting, women's poverty and joint custody. She pointed to the conspicuous financial interests of the "battalions of experts" from the therapeutic and legal fields that stand behind the struggle for "shared parenting". According to her this struggle serves them well, financially and personally, while robbing the children of the sense of stability. Adv. Tagrid Jachshan, an advocate and political activist in Jewish and Arab women's organizations, described the position of Moslem women that get divorced in the Sharia courts and added that recently there have been an increase in rulings that award custody to the Moslem men, not in a quest for equality but in the spirit of the Islam. She claimed that joint custody does not fit the prevailing reality, in which women bear the main responsibility for raising the children. Dr. Odeda Peled, a neuro-psychologist, discussed the interrelations between culture and biology and explained that customs and traditions are imprinted in us more strongly than nature itself. Dr. Peled called to allow more time for the processes leading to new parenting. At an early age the child needs a figure that specializes in nurturing, and currently it is still the mother. Thus it is too early to change the law. Things may change in the future.

In this debate women represented various female identities: that of mothers, of experts, and of social activists. The event also exposed the profound common interests of women from different groups as mothers: Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, religious and secular. It further appears that it is difficult to separate between the personal, the professional and the public perspectives, as it was revealed by Prof. Lavie's presentation. Lavie unfolded her personal story as a battered wife with abused son, who experienced also abuse on the part of the legal authorities (in the US and in Israel). At the same time she holds extensive knowledge in legal and social issues related to the subject, and is also a person whose social activities grew out of personal experience. She is an example of a woman whose feminist commitment to weaker women in society is based on both her personal experience and expertise.

The "tender age custody" was brought up by the Women's Parliament while the academia refrained from addressing this subject. It also provided a platform for women scholars who contributed to the debate and the struggle, from a personal and professional angle. Only recently have discussions on the subject been held also in the academia and some research is being done.

This struggle demonstrated, albeit something we already knew, that grassroots activity can put on the public agenda and introduce into the academic ivory tower neglected subjects of concern to society. Moreover, rather than leading critical research on social issues, the latter often follow

marginalized social organizations in studying the changing reality. In other words, academia is a conservative framework, part of the hegemonic social order that responds slowly and sometimes hostilely to social changes and struggles that take place in wider society.

Some striking occurrences took place in response to the "tender age custody" session. A group of men, several of those who demand to cancel the clause and to introduce "joint custody", contacted the event sponsors, which had provided the venue for the session. They blatantly demanded that they cancel the event. The claim used by the men was that this was a "racist" activity against children and men, which aims to rob their rights of "fatherhood". The men also contacted Friedrich Ebert Foundation, demanding that they cancel their support of the Women's Parliament, because of its racism against men. Some of the men, involved in the efforts to prevent the event, are behind websites that incite against "feminists", and some even use pornographic pictures in order to debase them.<sup>8</sup>

The event took place, despite the threats and pressures. Before it started there was a demonstration by men against the event, outside the hall. The men displayed a hanging rope which was placed around one of the demonstrator's neck, used to attract the attending journalists. Before the event began the men begged the organizers to be allowed into the auditorium. After undertaking in writing not to disturb and to leave the hall if asked to do so if they breached their promise, the demonstrators were permitted to enter the hall. The discussion proceeded relatively peacefully, except for sporadic comments of the moderator, who reminded the men of their commitment. Throughout the event the men contacted the organizers, in writing and verbally, to be allowed to take the stage. And indeed, after a presentation of the positions as planned, and when the discussion was opened to the audience, the men (and women who supported them) came on stage and presented their positions. The entire discussion was filmed by a photographer on behalf of the men, who pretended to be a public TV reporter. The conduct of the media was highly indicative; over the many years of the Parliament's activity it received only minimal coverage, but in this case, perceived as "war between the sexes", the media showed great interest. An article in *Haaretz*<sup>9</sup> dealt extensively with the dispute, while "balancing" between polarized, hostile positions. Radio and TV programs reiterated and stressed the "war of the sexes". A prominent talk show moderator shed a tear, revealing his support for the men's position, and his sympathy to the suffering of a "bereaved father" (whose children are alive), on his panel.

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. David Fishelzon wrote (on 12/10/2005 in [www.mishmoret.org.il](http://www.mishmoret.org.il)): "Just like the Nazis who tortured Jews out of idealism – and not because the Jews did anything – so too the crazy feminists torture men out of ideology". Another example is a website called "Man's Rights in Israel" which among others presents a voodoo doll, with the caption: "A new toy called 'All men are evil' which will allow women to practice stabbing men".

<sup>9</sup> "Women's organizations against the intention to cancel the automatic custody of small children", by Ruti Sinai, May 2005).

It appears that the media reflects the gender power system in society and contributes to its strengthening. Claims about "balance" and "rating" expectations, blur the role of the media in fanning the hatred between men and women in this context. However, it should be noted that there were also articles that presented the subject fairly and even supported the non-cancellation of the Tender Age Custody clause. Thus, we learnt through this dramatic event that the media is an important agent in inflaming the hostility between the genders.

Among the panelists of that session was a father and activist in the Movement for New Masculinity. But his presentation aroused no interest in any of the media. While he was an invited guest to the discussion and even though he represented a position different to that of the women organizers – and even though among the audience there were a number of invited members from the Movement of New Masculinity – these were of no interest to the media. Channel 2, which filmed the event, ignored them completely. The channel presented generously the positions of the aggressive men, while exposing its bias. The item on Channel 2 presented the event as a "convention of feminists", did not mention the Women's Parliament, and the filming bypassed the Parliament's banner, conspicuously displayed in front of the stage.

The role played by women, both activists and journalists, demonstrated that women, consciously or unconsciously, act as "collaborators", similar to other cases of deprived groups. In the case of the struggle over the clause of the tender age custody, they advocated gender equality in general and care for children's welfare in particular. They expressed their contempt for both, "old-fashioned" feminists and "feminist radicals", that "harm the good name of feminism".

Thus, as men dominate the media, feminist men committed to partnership with women and to the struggle for equality have no chance of winning recognition and exposure. Furthermore, it appears that men's aggressiveness towards "feminist" women is willingly accommodated and even support by the chauvinist media.

While dealing with a core issue of gender relations, such as parenting, the Women's Parliament exposed overt and covert barriers on partnership for both genders, in the prevailing unbalanced power structure. It also exposed the heavy price for all, women, men and children, which the current situation involves. The discussion and the tumultuous events surrounding the Parliament's event highlighted the importance and urgency for men and women to work together toward a fundamental gender change. This is expected to generate partnership between the genders and an equal distribution of resources and responsibility between men and women. The gender change necessitates the development of mechanisms of equal opportunities, in the work place as well as in other spheres.

In the example described, the Women's Parliament created drama that exposed men's hostility and aggressiveness

towards women ("feminists"), in a reality that limits their part in parenting and discriminates women in the labor market and in other spheres. Hence, cooperation between women and men with awareness of gender equality and of social injustice is vital for constructing a fair and just society for all. The event exposed also the media's support of the prevailing gender power structure: by ignoring men who want cooperation with women, by supporting misogynistic positions and by imposing the image of self-evident gender war. The public debate organized by the Women's Parliament in collaboration with experts from the academia and representatives of women's groups, and the establishment of a coalition of women's organizations against the changing of the law, following the Parliament's session, prevented, so far, the change in the law.

### **Gender and Education: Teachers' status, reforms and women's leadership**

Another drama took place in the Parliament's 38<sup>th</sup> session, held in January 2006,<sup>10</sup> in Ra'anana,<sup>11</sup> titled: "Dovrat Committee's report: The economic policy and teacher's status". The timing of the session, very close to elections for the Teachers' Union (held on 1 February of the same year), was not coincidental. The decision to hold it was taken with the intention of supporting a woman's candidacy for heading the Teachers' Union. Although this Union consists almost exclusively of women (more than 90%), it has never been headed by a woman, since its establishment 107 years ago. The candidate, called Yaffa Ben-David, was a teacher and head of the Teachers' Union branch in Kiryat Gat<sup>12</sup> vicinity. Announcing that Ben-David will be on the panel of speakers raised the ire of the Teachers' Union's heads, and especially that of the secretary-general of the Teachers' Union, who was running for a second term. When the Teachers' Union heads were informed about the coming event, to be hosted by the mayor of Ra'anana, and especially about Ben David's participation, they reacted forcefully, trying to prevent the event from taking place.

The events related to this session of the Parliament demonstrated the use of control mechanisms which serve to keep the bastions of power in the hands of men, totally unrelated to relevant talent and management skills. Thus, women are being excluded from heading even an organization that consists of almost no men. The centralized system ensures that the Labor Party (that dominates the Teachers' Union), will have the power to determine the head of the teachers' union, and they always appointed men. Women can at best win the position of deputies or heads of the kindergarten teachers' sub-unit.

Another way of excluding women from taking over the leadership of the Teachers' Union, as it emerged from Ben-David's talk, is hiding their candidacy from potential teacher-voters. Teachers were not acknowledged of the fact that Ben-David ran for the position. Moreover, according to Ben-

<sup>10</sup> See book of abstracts of the Women's Parliament, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Ra'anana is a town in the center of Israel.

<sup>12</sup> Kiryat Gat is a town in the South part of the country.

David, her entrance to schools, where she could have met the teachers, was prevented. As the media hardly reported or discussed the elections in the Teachers' Union or the candidates, the public and the teachers in particular could not become acquainted with the new candidate, or even be aware of her existence.

Intense pressures were exerted on the organizers to prevent the event. They included telephone calls, requests and even threats on the sponsors and panel participants to postpone the event until after the elections of the Teachers' Union. It was claimed that the Women Parliament's event would constitute an inappropriate interference in the Union's internal elections. Giving in to the pressures, the mayor of Ra'anana cancelled his participation in the event, and a school principal cancelled her participation on the panel. MK Yuli Tamir contacted one of the organizers and pleaded her to postpone the event. She explained that if it will take place it may result in bringing someone "right-wing, fanatic, religious", to take over the Teachers' Union. Tamir warned, further, that Ben David's victory could harm "one of our last strongholds [of the left, *author*]". Yael German, mayor of Herzliya, agreed to replace the mayor of Ra'anana and participated in the panel, expressing her support of the Parliament in face of the pressures. On her way to the event she received a telephone call from the head of the Teachers' Union, asking her to cancel her participation. Although he was invited to participate in the discussion he refused. However, realizing that the event was to take place despite the pressures, the Union's head allowed his female deputy to participate in the panel.

Unsurprisingly, the discussion clarified that the head of the Teachers' Union had good reason to worry. Panel participants criticized the Union's responsibility for the unprecedented erosion of teachers' salaries since the beginning of the decade, for the severe cuts in the education budgets, for the Union's weakness in facing Dovrat Committee, and the ongoing humiliation of teachers. The discussion suggested that in order to improve economic and social status of women teachers, they must be the ones to represent and lead themselves.

The criticism over the teachers' organizations' poor achievements came up, even more determinedly, in a Parliament session held in Kfar Saba<sup>13</sup> in January 2008, titled: "Women Teachers to Government". The Minister of Education Prof. Yuli Tamir was blamed for dividing between the two main teachers' organizations and the Teachers' Union was blamed for having cooperated with the Ministry of Education, signing the *Ofek Chadash* ("new horizons") agreement, even though many teachers objected to it. A principal of a local High School claimed that the "teachers received a few shekels as a supplement to their salaries and returned to their classes humiliated and angry. The reason for this is that the teachers are women [...] the government of the State of Israel did not refrain from taking any measures against the striking women teachers". This gloomy analysis

was expanded by a High School teacher, who led the struggle against the *Ofek Hadash* agreement. Using numerous examples of the agreement's failure to introduce any improvement in teachers' working conditions and wage, she blamed the heads of the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Education and the Teachers' Union for the "humiliation of the teachers in an agreement that pours down the drain years of achievements in the work conditions of the teacher [...] This is a new employment agreement composed entirely of a deterioration of conditions [...] which includes a minor addition of money while significantly reducing the hourly value". It warrants mentioning that heavy financial suits were brought against this woman-teacher, for alleged libel (in her website).

A similar drama to the one that surrounded the 38<sup>th</sup> session in Ra'anana recurred in the 66<sup>th</sup> session that took place in Kiryat Shmona<sup>14</sup>, on 22 February 2011. It focused on women's leadership in education. This session was planned in cooperation with the mayor's advisor on women's status in Kiryat Shmona and Katzrin,<sup>15</sup> and local women's organizations. Soon after the invitations were sent out the head of the Teachers' Union contacted the Ebert foundation (the main funder of the Women's Parliament), demanding to cancel the event, because, so it was claimed, it constituted intervention in the elections of the Teachers' Union slated for the beginning of April. Turning to the foundation took place because a woman, called Gila Klein, who was running for the head of the organization, was one of the panelists. When the Ebert foundation's director refused to comply with this demand, the Union's head asked to meet with him. Following the meeting, the event's organizers were demanded to include on the panel two of his people, one who would address the professional aspect and the other who would address the political aspect (confronting Klein). Additionally, as the intended convener had expressed public support for Klein it was demanded that she should be replaced by an "objective", "neutral" person. Pressures were also exerted on the partners in Kiryat Shmona to avoid the use of their venue. The event finally did take place. Following an announcement by the Parliament's steering committee that the Union's head's conditions were rejected, the foundation terminated its partnership with the Women's Parliament and cancelled its financial support.

In light of the paltry media coverage of the corrupt running of the Teachers' Union, the intimidating means used against teachers, the silencing and "buying off" of Klein's supporters, it was not surprising that the Union's head succeeded to gain control over it for the third term. Nevertheless, Klein's success to get 15% of the votes, becoming the third largest faction in the Teachers' Union, signifies a substantial change within the organization and in its male dominated culture.

The events surrounding the Parliament's sessions demonstrate the means taken by men at the helm of organizations to preserve their control. Among others: using threats, slander,

<sup>13</sup> A neighboring town of Ra'anana.

<sup>14</sup> Kiryat Shmona is a town in the north part of Israel.

<sup>15</sup> Katzrin is a town in the Golan Heights.

exerting pressure on people with critical positions, silencing (or buying off) the media, filing libel suits and co-opting the opposition leadership. Another important point to emphasize concerning the education sessions is the tactic of recruiting women to confront other women. Women in senior positions, like a minister in the government and deputy chair of the Teachers' Union, cooperated in undermining the chances of women to be elected to leadership positions. In the case of the elections in the Teachers' Union, where the vast majority of the organization's members are women the implications are extremely irritating.

The Parliament's sessions in Ra'anana, Kfar Saba and Kiryat Shmona demonstrated the fact that women have the ability, skills and determination to improve teachers' working conditions and the education system, as well as to promote social change in general. However, it appears that men's pervasive control over power positions and resources serves them to prevent women's entrance into the leadership of their own Union (and other organizations) and to bring about any significant gender and social change. The failure of women to enter power centers and leading positions clearly point to the vital necessity for women (teachers and kindergarten teachers in this context) to collectively support those who take upon themselves to lead the struggle and expose themselves to the risk of being suspended from the organization, of being fired, subject to libel suits and the like. Moreover, women must overcome the barriers of fear and intimidation which are used to silence their representatives. The Parliament sessions that supported the candidacy of women for leadership in the teachers' organizations and in other contexts, were inspired by this understanding. The Women's Parliament's dramatic sessions did well in terms of unveiling the methods and strategies applied against women who dare to threaten men's control. However, the Women's Parliament did not change this reality. The Teachers' Union's male domination prevailed. In this context too, the media gave negligible coverage to the event and did not provide the crucial exposure for those contending for leadership of the Teachers' Union and for the Women's Parliament events that supported them.

Another relevant issue in this context is that women's organizations refrained from supporting the women candidates being afraid, probably, of losing their funding (as they could be accused of interfering in internal elections).

### **Women's Parliament – some implications and insights**

The Women's Parliament unveils some of the marginalizing mechanisms employed by male dominated systems towards women. The Parliament's accumulated experience also reveals the common interests of social groups, which the patriarchy has rendered rivals, encouraging them to competition, hatred and destructive wars. The Parliament's discussions that were described demonstrate the need for constructing alternative concepts, discourse and practices,<sup>16</sup>

which challenge the biased and repressive gender reality. The Women's Parliament contributes to strengthening and disseminating concepts of defiance and criticism of the social gender order. It encourages action for change and cooperation between groups of women and subsequently (or concurrently) between women and men.

Establishing Women's Parliaments, anywhere, necessitates extensive voluntary activity and independent resources which will allow freedom from restricting obligations and submission to the patriarchal establishment (as happens with most women's organizations in Israel and in other places<sup>17</sup>). The experience of the Women's Parliament, as it emerges from the description of the sessions on gender, education and teachers' organizations, suggests that voluntary activity enables to address fragile and loaded issues in a critical manner and to hear voices that the ruling elites silence. The fact that the funding for the Women's Parliament activity came from an external source (a German foundation) allowed a certain degree of freedom from pressures and intervention of government agencies. However, in the Parliament's sessions held on the eve of the Teachers' Union's elections this independence turned out to be rather limited. The Ebert Foundation withheld its financial support, claiming it had to refrain from supporting events where the panelists are candidates for coming elections. The pressures exerted by the heads of the Teachers' Union resulted in cutting the financial support to the Parliament and in deterring people from participating in the events. Thus, the potential influence of the Women's Parliament depends on its ability to fund its activity independently.

The Women's Parliament's discussions strive to break through the "hub of the establishment", influencing it from within and not only from the margins. From this point of view, the Parliament session on the Dovrat Report shows the potential strength conveyed by cooperation with governing agencies (e.g. city councils), as much as posing a threat to the heads of the Teachers' Union. They [the heads] reacted by applying pressures, which extricated the potential impact of the Parliament's session. By contrast, the participation of Dalia Itzik, the Knesset Chairperson at the time, in the session which discussed women's absence from leadership of the teachers' organizations (held in January 2008), afforded State acknowledgement to the Parliament's significance. Moreover, following this session the Women's Parliament was invited to hold a session in the Knesset.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, a Women's Parliament should act both from "outside", relying on independent resources which will enable free and critical discourse, and from within the establishment, using resources held by governing systems (such as halls, equipment, public relations), while challenging their perceptions and practices. Hence the framework of a Women's Parliament can serve to develop and accelerate

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<sup>16</sup> A few examples for feminist alternative thinking about gendered power relations, social order and gender change are: Riane Eisler (1987, 2007), Joan Acker (1990), Genevieve Vaughan (1997).

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<sup>17</sup> See: Chatty and Rabo, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> This session did not take place as the elections were set for a few months later and Itzik decided not to hold the session during the election period.

processes of change emerging from grassroots level, across communities and social organizations in the center and in the periphery.

The Women's Parliament refrains from centralized control and hierarchical management. However, the informal management of the Parliament and its voluntary nature presents an obstacle on the expansion of the activity in Israel and abroad. Rather than "head" or "director", the Women's Parliament in Israel has a "coordinator". This title indicates an operative rather than a controlling position with power and honor. Nevertheless the Parliament's coordinator is the director in effect. Thus, the dependence of the Women's Parliament on a single person entails the vagueness of its future. Indeed, no hierarchy is relevant in this framework, as it does not control financial or political resources. However, this mode of operation determines the scope of activity.

The steering committee of the Women's Parliament provides a solid public support for its activities. It is based on a group of prominent women, most of who joined the Parliament when it was established (in 1999). The committee members take part in deciding on places and topics of the sessions, they participate in meetings with officials and women councils, and attend its sessions. The committee offered a crucial support in the stage of founding the Parliament and it has provided a public backing for the Parliament's prestige since its inception.

The coalitions that emerged following the discussions in the Israeli Women's Parliament attest to the potential contained in joint action, which is capable of breaking structured barriers. Thus it was in the fight against pornography that succeeded (to a certain extent, as said) thanks to the ad-hoc cooperation between women's organizations and with the orthodox parties. Similarly, the Women's Parliament session on tender age custody led to the founding of a coalition of women's organizations to prevent the change in the law.

Bringing together women's groups from divergent backgrounds in terms of nationality, religion, ethnicity, status, age, etc. embodies great potential. However, the attempts of the Israeli Women's Parliament points to limited success in continuously nurturing the bonds. For instance, despite the fact that a substantial effort is being made to include in the panels speakers from different and even opposing groups, the audience participating in the Parliaments' sessions is often homogenous. In most of the sessions there are hardly any Arab women in the audience, unless the sessions are held in Arab locales; there are few religious participants in the events of the Women's Parliament and no orthodox participants at all (who refrain from approaching any activity identified as "feminist"). This situation demands that the framework be adapted to the needs of women from the divergent groups. Running the Parliament's sessions throughout the country provides a partial solution to this problem, in that they are held all around the country, in Jewish and Arab locales, in the center and in the periphery.

The achievements of the feminist struggle, which seem to contribute to the wellbeing of human kind, should be institutionalized. The establishment of Women's Parliaments can contribute to delivering the values of equality, based on honor and compassion, to human society the world over.

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