

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

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Abstract: In the 2018 local elections in Israel, the number of women candidates elected to mayoral position increased by three times taking the tally to 13, the highest ever in Israel. The purpose of this article is to highlight the steady increase in women representation in the municipal elections of Israel and the analyse the factors which contributed in the increased representation of women in the local government.

Introduction

Israel is a multi-party parliamentary system based on the elections that are general, equal and secret. On the national level they are held at least once every four years, and on the municipal level at least once every five years.ⁱ

In 1975, a reform in local government laws designated the position of mayor as the only directly elected political office (until 1995, when the position of Prime Minister also became subject to direct election). As a result, the position of mayor gained prestige, competition increased between male candidates and fewer women were supported by political parties. Women candidates have since had little success in mayoral elections. Twenty-nine women ran for mayoral slots in 1989, only one was elected; ten women ran in 1993; none were elected; in 2008, one woman was elected as a mayor but only one other woman finished in the top 3 of candidates in any of the other 16 mayoral elections.ⁱⁱ

Given Israel's excellent educational opportunities for women, strong legislation and history of women politicians, men and women should be equally represented within the ranks of public leadership. Nevertheless, women have been consistently underrepresented in virtually all areas of public life. The Knesset, the local government, and the political parties are dominated by men.

Equality and active political participation cannot be separated. Active political participation is necessary for the advancement of the women. Their Political participation does not only mean the right to vote but also participation in decision making, sharing power, and participation at policy making level.

Various Psychological and personal reasons have been cited in the past for the underrepresentation of women in the public life of Israel, in addition to structural- political factors.

Letty Pogrebrin in Deborah, Golda and Me described three iron gates barring women's path in Israel: the primacy of the security issue, the power of the religious authorities, and the "Golda Meir syndrome"- a modern day adaptation of the gender equality myth.ⁱⁱⁱ

Zionism as an ideology and a movement constructs very particular notions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations. Through persistent references to the survival of Israel and the Jewish people as a whole, the assertion of an aggressive and highly militarized masculinity is justified by the need to end a history of weakness, suffering and persecution.^{iv}

The system of proportional representation, which actually encouraged women's representation in Europe, has not had the same effect in Israel as political parties lack confidence in the ability of the women to attract votes

Cultural pressures to marry early and start a family are strong among Israeli women. As a result, many women who are interested in politics sacrifice their own aspirations in the name of marriage and family. Another explanation for lower level of women representation could be the ethnic basis of the Israeli society. It is quite possible that the high percentage of people of African and Asian origin in the Jewish population also had an indirect influence on rate of women in national and local government, since the African and Asian family discourages active political participation of women altogether.^v

Despite all these factors an increase in the number of women representatives has been seen in the sphere of local government in recent years. While the number of women MKs has remained relatively stable since the early days of the state, the number of women participating in local politics has increased systematically. In 1950, 4.2 percent of local representatives were women; by 1978, 5.5%; and in 1993, 11%. In 2011, there were many women local representatives

though only one woman, Yael German, was serving as a mayor of a local authorityⁱ and there was only one female mayor elected – Miriam Feirberg of Netanya – out of Israel's top 40 cities in the 2013 local elections.^{vi} However, Victories for Hagar Perry Yagur in Pardes Hannah-Karkur (with 54% of the vote) and Ye'ela Michal Maklis in Yahud-Monson (56%) boosted the number of women elected mayor in the latest election of 2018 to 13, a dramatic increase from the scant five who won in the 2013 local elections.^{vii}

This increase in the number of women representatives can be attributed to the legislation passed in 2014 that encourages greater female representation. Co-sponsored by parliamentarians Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid), Yifat Kariv (Yesh Atid) and Haneen Zoabi (Balad), the law rewards municipal parties whose elected representatives are at least one-third female with an additional 15% in government funding.^{viii}

In addition to that, various campaigns were organised to encourage women to run in the National municipal elections. The campaign under the slogan "Run!" in feminine form by the authority under Social Equality Minister Gila Gamliel's ministry is an example of one such campaign.^{ix}

There is no reason to infer that women will move the nation in another direction when it comes to the big questions with regards to the unavoidable issue of war and peace with neighbouring countries. However, with regards to battling for vital female issues –, for example, financial and social equity, and wellbeing for women compromised by aggressive behaviour at home – having a gender balance in the lobbies of intensity has a vital effect.

The Israel Democracy Institute research team examined the legislative activity of MKs between 2006 and 2013 and found that female MKs generally promote bills and initiatives concerning education, health, social affairs and gender equality. As such, having more women in key political positions helps ensure that these and similar areas get enough attention.^x

Conclusion

The IDI survey, which was conducted between January 22 and 24, 2019 via telephone and Internet, likewise found that more than half (52%) of the Jewish public thinks it is important to ensure that women rank high on their party's list.^{xi}

The election in April will further boost female representation still higher and push women's issues further to the fore as the strike in December in protest against the government's ignoring of the homicide of women and violence in the family highlighted the increasing prominence of women's issue in the Israeli society. Political consultant Dahlia Scheindlin believes the number of women "stands to rise – the momentum is there." Gains in the recent municipal races were a positive sign of what she calls a "a neo-feminist wave."^{xii}

References

ⁱ <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/State/Democracy/Pages/Israeli%20Democracy%20-%20How%20does%20it%20work.aspx>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israeli-women-in-politics-and-public-life>

ⁱⁱⁱ Letty Pogrebrin, *Deborah, Golda and Me: Being female and Jewish in America*. (New York: Crown, 1991).

^{iv} Simona Sharoni, *The myth of Gender Equality and the limits of Women's political dissent in Israel*, Middle East Report, No. 207, *Who Paid the Price? 50 Years of Israel* (Summer,1998), pp. 24-28

^v <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israeli-women-in-politics-and-public-life#local>

^{vi} <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Status-of-women-in-Israeli-politics-The-good-the-bad-and-the-road-to-full-equality-483566>

^{vii} <https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-mayors-more-women-2018-local-elections-summed-up/>

^{viii} <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/3318>

^{ix} <http://www.themedialine.org/more-from-the-media-line/record-number-of-women-elected-in-israeli-municipal-elections/>

^x <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Govt-starts-campaign-to-elect-more-female-mayors-558223>

^{xi} <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/3318>

^{xii} <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Over-half-of-Israelis-say-Netanyahu-should-resign-if-A-G-moves-to-indict-579628>

^{xiii} <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-will-2019-be-a-record-election-for-israeli-women-the-top-female-politicians-to-foll-1.6826473>