

Women's Issues in Israel

Joyce Rosman Brenner, DSW '83

*Associate Adjunct Professor and Director, Block Program in Israel,
Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Israel*

This article discusses the equality between the sexes in contemporary Israel. It has a threefold focus: the causes of gender conflict and inequality, problems that remain serious issues, and a review of current programs responsive to women's issues with comments and proposals for the future.

In an article written more than 30 years ago (Brenner, 1973) in which I shared my personal experiences in Israel after spending a year there and having a child, I commented on the problematic issues between men and women and wondered if and when feminism would arrive in Israel and what impact it would have upon Israeli society.

A great deal has happened in Israel and everywhere in the world since the seventies. In 1976, I officially made aliyah to Israel, and have been there ever since. As a feminist activist, I and other psychotherapists founded the Counseling Center for Women, the only feminist therapy center in Israel. My DSW dissertation (Brenner, 1983) centered on the attitudes and values of Israeli social workers toward sex roles. I am currently the chair of the committee on Women as a Specialization within the Igud (the Israel Social Work Union). To my joy, women's issues have become an integral aspect of life in Israel, but not always in positive ways.

The most recent developments in Israel with regard to gender conflicts are reflected in headlines detailing incidents of sexual harassment by the Justice Minister Haim Ramon (who was found guilty), and the president of Israel, Moshe Katsav, being accused of rape. These two high-profile cases are hardly isolated ones, in spite of very

stringent laws that make even a disparaging remark about sex or sexuality both a criminal misdemeanor and possible grounds for a civil suit. For many years, there have been rumors that some of Israel's top army personnel and even government ministers considered sexual encounters with female employees a right and privilege. A society that has a strong foundation in male strength and machismo easily looked the other way regarding incidents of harassment. Sadly, a certain amount of male rakishness seems to add to a man's allure in Israel (Kraft, 2006). It is depressing to learn that the Israel we know and love is facing these scandals. We do not as yet know what will be the outcome of court cases and public outcries; what we do know is we need an in-depth soul searching of our attitudes and values toward these issues so we can suggest and plan for changes.

The thrust of this article is threefold: to reflect on the causes of gender conflict and inequality, examine problems that remain serious issues, and review current programs that are responsive to women's issues with comments and proposals for the future.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is crucial for all of us to examine our own myths and stereotypes regarding gen-

der equality. Israel is a very complex society with many powerful prevailing myths regarding the equality of women. These myths seem to give credence to a more positive image of women than that which actually exists.

These myths, which persist to this day, emerged during the state's pioneering era, (1880–1920) because of the influence of socialist Zionism (Brenner, Savran, & Sinder, 2002). Prime Minister Golda Meir represented the rare Israeli woman who achieved a high position in political life (the numbers of women who have actually attained high status in the political world is quite low), but her experience strengthened the myth of the heroic Israeli woman. Hazelton (1977) and Swirsky and Safir (1991) have sharply criticized this false image of equality. In most sectors of Israel, traditional family roles are more the rule, and women's place in the home as mother and grandmother may often take priority over professional responsibilities: "For better or for worse, the Israeli woman's work for the family is never done" (Swirsky & Safir, 1991). The kibbutz experiment also gave credence to the possibility of an innovative society in which everyone would share in the tasks needed to keep the daily operation of the kibbutz functioning. However, the kibbutz experiment, for the most part, did not succeed. Most kibbutzim today have been privatized or are going through the process of privatization. The glorious image of a young woman driving a tractor was more fantasy than truth. Very few women participated in jobs that were out of the realm of "women's work"—care for the children, doing the laundry, cooking, serving as teachers and nurses, and being responsible for the general care of the kibbutz population. Thus, another aspect of the myth dissolved (Silver, 1984).

To further complicate the picture, Israeli society, because of the ingathering of so many different immigrant groups in so short a time, is sharply characterized not only by the usual political and economic class distinctions but also by diverse ethnic and

ideological groupings (Smootha, 1978). Some of these ethnic groups more strongly favor the "patriarchal flavor" that underlies much of daily life in Israel. Though often thought of as an enclave of Western mores and patterns within the Middle East, in truth, Israel is very much influenced by her Arab neighbors. More than 51 percent of the population comes from North African countries, a significant variable affecting contemporary gender issues. Many of the explanations for the recent scandalous behavior of politicians are rooted in this very fact. Are the Israelis expressing and modeling behavior between men and women that might have been acceptable in other parts of the Middle East? Does the holding of political office seem to have given many males certain prerogatives for deviant behavior? We return to these questions in this article.

Even more serious is the fact that Israel, as a country that is continually under siege, gives first priority to defense (Wainkrater, 1991). This "siege mentality" powerfully affects the daily rhythm of Israeli life, as illustrated so powerfully after the events of the war in Lebanon. Any woman with an adult male in her life will see him leave for army service at regularly scheduled intervals. At age 18, he will go for the three-year compulsory service. After that, until the age of 45, he will go to reserve duty or for war for one and a half months of every year. Daughters will be conscripted for a year and a half of required service, but must serve in an institution that cannot avoid being chauvinistic and in an environment that encourages sexual harassment. It is not easy for a mother of a young infant to ask her partner to change the baby's diaper after he has been serving under horrendous conditions, faced imminent danger, and been on the frontline for far too many days. The mother, too, has been alone with the children and dealt with the demands of single parenting for far too many days. Women seem to absorb the enormous pressures imposed by the ongoing threat of Middle East conflict. Denial and repression become in-

dispensable to the mental and emotional survival of Israeli citizens, permeating the relationships between men and women, which is not always conducive to an atmosphere of equality.

In Israel the confrontation in everyday affairs between secular and religious politics, male and female conflicts, and war and peace issues creates a tension that can be labeled “the perpetual dilemmas.”

CURRENT PROBLEMS

These statistics have been collected by the Rape Crisis Centers in Israel and the Israel Women’s Network (Women’s Lobby, 2006).

- More than 33% of women in Israel have experienced sexual attacks.
- One in five women has experienced rape. 75% of these women were attacked by someone known to them.
- More than 200,000 women are estimated to be battered.
- In the last ten years more than 200 women have been murdered by their partners.
- In 2005, 11 women were murdered by their partners. In the first quarter of 2006 alone, seven women were murdered by their partners, an increase of 100% (reported in *Haaretz* and *Yediot Aharonot* in February 2007).

No one really wants to deal with the issue of human trafficking, but it cannot be ignored indefinitely. Several hundred women (the numbers are not clear for many reasons) cross into Israel each year as part of the “slave trade” of prostitutes.

The problem of *agunot*—chained women who are unable to obtain a divorce from their recalcitrant husbands—persists. There are estimates of 5,000 women in Israel “stuck” in this category. Many grassroots organizations are trying to respond, but somehow the mainstream halakhic (legal) experts have failed to resolve this particular problem.

In the work sphere, women still receive

67% of the salaries awarded to men, even though they occupy the exact same positions. Sixty percent of the unemployed are women. Only 13% of the members of the Knesset (Parliament) are female. In the last two years, the number of female high-ranking officers in the army has decreased by 40 percent.

Because of the recent war in Lebanon, there have been severe cutbacks in welfare assistance to women and the elderly. The budget cuts especially hurt women, who receive 58% of old age pensions, 71% of government-funded home nursing care, and nearly 100% of child allowances. Since 77% of teachers are women and 75% of health workers are women, when there are layoffs women suffer both as clients and as workers (Swirsky, 2007).

How do we begin to comprehend these statistics? Are gender relations any worse or better in Israel than in other countries? In other Western nations? It does seem that in Israel the male machismo image is still very prevalent. Political titles seem to have given men the prerogative to abuse, take advantage, and to insist that they are entitled to act as if they have done nothing wrong when harassing their female employees or underlings. This accusation is presented with caution and with the realization that it needs not only to be addressed but also to be the catalyst for change and improvement. As social workers and concerned citizens who are often the conscience of a society, we cannot be quiet and allow inequalities to persist.

At a recent social gathering, a heated conversation revolved around women’s issues—and the group was equally divided between those attacking President Katsav and Haim Ramon and those defending them, trying to pretend that “nothing terrible happened.” Certainly Ramon’s famous kiss cannot be compared with the alleged rapes of the president. What was amazing was the willingness of many women to make every effort to protect the men in Israeli society. Perhaps this is just one of the many issues that must be scruti-

nized further. Gender studies must be instituted throughout the country.

Having focused on the negatives, we now focus on some of the positives that have occurred in Israel over the last 30 years with regard to gender issues.

POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

"Feminism is a movement where women get more radical as they get older," said Patricia Ireland, executive vice president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1989. This statement seems to be a truism for many of us who have been involved with the advancement of women's issues since the seventies. Sexism does not rear its ugly head until women are well along in their careers and are juggling children with promotions. We now examine some of the programs and activities that reflect the progress that has occurred in Israel.

One of every two Israeli women is in the labor force. At first this seems to be a positive trend, but it is a lower ratio than in the United States where six in ten American women work. Thus there are fewer Israeli families with two incomes, thereby lowering the number of middle-class families. However, child care facilities are available for working mothers, from earliest infancy to the crucial school years.

A major challenge to Israeli families is the presence of fathers in children's lives. Most fathers work long hours to maintain a high standard of living and come home late each night. However, there seems to be a silent revolution occurring in male attitudes, with many men expressing a willingness to find their place in the care of their young children. Several young couples to whom I've spoken say that it is no longer embarrassing to be the at-home father. The more "women's work" that men perform, the more respectable that work becomes and the less do men take women for granted. More dads are taking their little ones to *gan* (kindergarten) and to school. Change is definitely happening, though

some of these changes are a bit too slow; however, there is definitely progress and hope. (In my own personal life, I have become a grandmother and see my daughters continue to struggle with so many of the same issues that we thought we had revolutionized).

In almost every *Matnas* (community center) in Israel there are assertiveness training programs for women. These programs, facilitated by social workers, are offered to women of all ages, from the teen years to women who have retired. The stereotype of the Israeli woman who "can't say no" is no longer valid. Anger management courses are also prevalent, perhaps especially necessary because of the explosive style of interaction in Israel.

Rape crisis centers, shelters for battered women, and hotlines for observant and nonobservant women regarding sexual problems are readily available and responsive to the many requests for help and incidents of abuse. Police as well as medical personnel are trained to be sensitive to the nuance of complaints about family violence and abuse. It is distressing that there are still many problematic occurrences, but it is comforting to know that services have been developed and are helpful.

New programs have been incorporated into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) for female soldiers. Working It Through (WIT), developed by the Counseling Center for Women, helps female soldiers advance in male-dominated technological fields and combat units. It is hoped that these female soldiers, by learning how to manage the stresses and challenges of working in male-dominated technological professions, will then be able to go on to future leadership positions within Israeli society at large.

Organizations such as the Women's Lobby (the *Shdulat Nashim*) continue to advocate for improvements for women on every level. It has become a watchdog for incidents of unfairness toward women.

CONCLUSION

In a recent interview, Dr. Orit Kamir, a professor of Law, Culture and Gender at Hebrew University (2007), applauds the Supreme Court's recent decision with regard to the famous Ramon kiss, and believes that there will be far-reaching effects for all aspects of women's issues. She believes that the legal system is doing an excellent job of treating harassment charges seriously, and sending out a clear message that offensive and inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated, even when performed by powerful men.

I believe strongly that women's perspectives can contribute to a better future for Israel in so many creative ways. Equality and egalitarianism are possible between the sexes; I try not to lose hope for a better future. We must take small steps and be willing to risk. We all must join together in being watchdogs for change. Gender equality will offer more choices for men and women, our sons as well as our daughters. This is part of the social work dream and I hope that our dreams will reach fulfillment.

REFERENCES

- Brenner, J. (1973). A year in Israel. *Jewish Social Work Forum*, 10, 48–52.
- Brenner, J. (1983) *Israeli social workers and sex roles: A study on values and attitudes toward sex roles and their impact upon practice*. Doctoral Dissertation. Wurzweiler School of Social Work, New York: Yeshiva University.
- Brenner, J. R., Savran, B., & Singer, I. (Eds.). (2002), *Women in the therapy space: Writings from CCW*. The Counseling Center for Women; Jerusalem and Ramat Gan, Israel.
- Hazelton, L. (1997). *Israeli women: The reality behind the myth*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Israel Women's Network (Women's Lobby). (2006). *Annual Report*. Retrieved from www.iwn.org.il
- Kamir, O. (2006) *Framed: Women in law and film*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kraft, D. (October 25, 2006). Israeli machismo slams into the law. *New York Times*. A2,8.
- Silver, V. (1984) *Male and female: Created He them* (In Hebrew). Tel Aviv; Yad Tavnekin.
- Smootha, S. (1978). *Israel: Pluralism and conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Swirsky, B., & Safir, M. P. (Eds.). (1991) *Calling the equality bluff: Women in Israel*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Waintrater, R. (1991). Living in a state of siege, In B. Swirsky & M. Safir(Eds.), *Calling the equality bluff: Women in Israel* (pp. 17–23). New York: Pergamon Press.