



Gender Equity and the Role of Women in Israeli Society

As part of the American Association of University Women's International Series on Culture and Gender Roles, a delegation of 16 AAUW members and seven guests traveled to Israel in October 2010 for eight days of dialogue, cultural events, and educational experiences. The delegation traveled to Haifa, Tel Aviv, Tiberias, and Jerusalem to meet with female leaders in Israeli political and professional life, including two Israel Prize laureates and the first female president of an Israeli university.

The goal of the trip was to build relationships and facilitate dialogue with a diverse group of leaders who are working to break through barriers for women and girls in the Middle East. Through these discussions, the delegates gained a deeper understanding of the region's challenges and learned how women are collaborating to develop positive, creative strategies to improve the educational, social, economic, and political status of women and girls.

Research issues addressed on the trip included the following questions: What are the roles of women in Israel? What is the relative status of women and men in Israel? How has Israeli women's education affected their opportunities and lifestyles?

The trip was focused on building relationships and social engagement—and increasing understanding of how gender affects the cultures that are represented in that region of the world. The delegation was not intended to endorse a particular position, political agenda, or government in the region; rather, it was part of AAUW's rich tradition of facilitating opportunities for inquiry, dialogue, and action.

This paper summarizes the major findings of the delegation. Unless otherwise indicated, statistics and statements cited in this paper are based on delegation members' notes from the discussions and cannot be verified by public data.

During the trip, the delegates met with several leaders, including

- Rivka Carmi, M.D., professor and president of the Ben Gurion University of the Negev
- Adi Kimchi, professor and adviser to the Weizmann Institute of Science on women's issues
- Tali Kimchi, Ph.D., professor, Department of Neurobiology, Weizmann Institute of Science
- Nurit Tsur, M.Sc., M.A., director of the Israel Women's Network
- Rachel Hertz-Lazarowitz, professor, University of Haifa
- Claudia Goodich-Avram, director of KIDMA, the Project for the Advancement of Women, University of Haifa
- Dalia Dorner, M.Jur., justice, Supreme Court of Israel, retired

- M.K. Tzipi Hotovely, LL.M., Knesset member and chair, Knesset Committee on the Status of Women
- Hedva Rabinson Bachrach, Ph.D., chair, Israel Association of University Women

I. The status of women in Israel

Since its independence in 1948, Israel has instituted laws to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. During meetings with female Israeli political and professional leaders, however, AAUW delegates learned that the struggle to achieve gender equality in Israel continues today.

The delegation met with Nurit Tsur, director of the Israel Women's Network (IWN), a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the status of women in Israel regardless of political affiliation, religious outlook, or ethnic origin. She explained that the world often views Israel as a liberal state because its women play an active role in the military and Golda Meir served as prime minister. "Although women in Israel are part of the economic, defense, health, and other systems of the state, we do *not* feel equal," Tsur said.

This sentiment was echoed by other leaders throughout the trip, who noted that the status of women in Israel is deceptive. In some areas, laws that grant equality on paper are often not enforced in day-to-day life. In other areas, traditions, social institutions, and religious practices keep women at a disadvantage.

Women's status in various sectors of Israeli life can also vary by ethnic or religious background, which makes it difficult to draw generalizations about the most pressing issues facing women in Israel today. Israel is home to a widely diverse population that includes people from many ethnic, religious, cultural, and social backgrounds. Nearly 76 percent of the state's 7.6 million people are Jewish (30 percent are considered "religious Jews," and the other 46 percent are secular Jews). The remaining 24 percent of the population is non-Jewish, of which 4 percent are non-Arab Christians and Muslims and nonaffiliated people, and the remaining 20 percent are defined collectively as Arab citizens of Israel. This latter group includes a number of primarily Arabic-speaking groups, each with distinct characteristics—Muslim Arabs, Bedouin Arabs, Christian Arabs, Druze, and Circassians.¹ Israel has also experienced a recent influx of immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union.

As the AAUW delegates learned, however, Israeli women, regardless of ethnic origin or religious background, face many of the same challenges as women in the United States—including pay inequity, sexual harassment in the workplace, violence, and underrepresentation in traditionally male fields.

Like the United States, where organizations like AAUW work to achieve gender equity, Israel also has groups that are working passionately to break through these barriers for women and

girls. Yet, as Professor Rachel Hertz-Lazarowitz of the University of Haifa told delegates, “In Israel, the progress of women will be through evolution, not revolution.”

II. Employment and pay equity

Israel passed legislation ensuring equality in the workplace as early as the 1950s.² Nevertheless, the delegates learned during their meetings with the IWN and university and government leaders that many employment laws are only partially enforced and that gender-based discrimination still exists.

Although Israeli law prohibits wage discrimination, women still earn less than men do.

On average, women in Israel earn significantly less than men do, despite legislation to ensure equal pay for men and women. In 1996, Israel passed the Male and Female Workers Equal Pay Law, which requires an employer “to pay its female and male employees equal pay for equal, essentially equal, or equivalent work.”³ According to the IWN, this law is not enforced, and women continue to earn less than men.⁴ The IWN’s Center for Research and Data reports that the average gap between a man’s salary and a woman’s salary in Israel is 20 percent. Additionally, while 52 percent of men receive a pension related to employment, only 26 percent of women enjoy the same benefit.⁵ Both men and women are eligible for social security (age-related pensions without an earnings test), though the age of eligibility differs by gender and is rising for both men and women.⁶

A “glass ceiling” exists for women, particularly in the education and civil service fields.

Approximately 50 percent of women in Israel are employed, compared with 62 percent of men. Among the non-Jewish population, only about 24 percent of women are employed.⁷ About half of women work in traditionally female occupations that offer relatively low wages, such as elementary education teachers, social services counselors, caretakers, secretarial workers, sales clerks, and kitchen and laundry workers.⁸

The majority of educators are women, particularly at the elementary level. During the 2008–09 academic year, women accounted for 88 and 75 percent of all teachers in the Hebrew and the Arabic education systems, respectively. In both systems, however, the percentage of women educators decreases as the academic level increases.⁹ Therefore, women educators are less common at the secondary and tertiary levels.

In higher education, women earn the majority of bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees (see education section below), but they represent a minority of faculty members. In fact, according to the IWN, among universities’ senior faculty—the highest positions in academia—women are a glaring minority. In the 2007–08 school year, women made up 25 percent of senior faculty in Israeli universities; the percentage was slightly higher in academic colleges (33 percent).¹⁰ A 2004 survey found that 25 percent of academic faculty members in Israel are women—10 percent lower than the European Union’s average, placing Israel in last place among participating countries.¹¹

The prevalence of the glass ceiling for women in academia was underscored by the AAUW delegates' visits to the Weizmann Institute of Science and the Ben Gurion University of the Negev. On these visits, the delegates gained a greater appreciation for why the percentage of women in upper-level faculty positions in the sciences remains low. Speakers explained that it is difficult to attract women as teachers in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields for a number of reasons, including low salaries and family and childcare concerns.

For instance, Rivka Carmi, president of the Ben Gurion University of the Negev, told delegates that she has difficulty recruiting women into the university ranks, particularly in medicine and genetics fields where the majority of faculty are men. But she stressed that the university is trying to improve the situation for women. For example, the school is changing its bylaws to eliminate some of the barriers for women and is also establishing a childcare center on campus. And, at a retreat the university held to educate male professors about the academic climate toward women, participants were asked, among other things, to examine their own daughters' lack of educational opportunity.

Women are underrepresented in the higher ranks of the Israeli civil service.

Similar to the pattern in education, the majority of government or civil service employees in Israel are women, but they are underrepresented among the highest ranks and in certain fields. Women make up 68 percent of civil service employees but hold only 34 percent of the highest-paying positions in the civil service (comparable to CEO and vice-CEO positions and directors of large hospitals).¹² Additionally, women make up the majority of government-employed biochemists (86 percent), social workers (83 percent), nurses (84 percent), and attorneys (68 percent), but a minority of medical doctors (35 percent), engineers (44 percent), and technicians (44 percent) are women.

Furthermore, as retired Supreme Court Justice Dalia Dorner explained to delegates, although 50 percent of young lawyers and justices are women, "there are fewer women as you move up in rank." Delegates did learn, however, that the Supreme Court, Israel's highest judicial authority, offers promising opportunities for women. Five of the court's 15 justices are women, and in 2006 Justice Dorit Beinisch was appointed chief justice of the Supreme Court, one of the most important positions in the civil service.¹³

Women hold a small number of government positions.

According to the IWN, a "pronounced inequality in women's participation in the political system" exists in Israel.¹⁴ At the national level, only 23 members of the 120-member Knesset are women,¹⁵ and women occupy just two out of 27 cabinet positions.¹⁶ Women's representation is also low in local politics. There are only four female mayors in the more than 250 municipalities, and only 11 percent of city council members are women.¹⁷

Although prohibited by law, sexual harassment in the workplace remains a problem.

The Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law, passed in 1998, prohibits all forms of verbal and physical sexual harassment in the workplace and places responsibility on the employer to take

preventive measures against sexual harassment. An employer who fails to meet these preventive requirements is liable on both the criminal and civil levels.¹⁸ Nevertheless, a study conducted by the Research and Economy Section at the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Labor revealed that only 66 percent of female salaried employees ages 20–45 are aware of this law.¹⁹

In 2008, the IWN reported that 239 sexual harassment cases were investigated—an increase from previous years (for example, 175 cases were investigated in 2005). In the same year, the Association of Rape Crises Centers in Israel reported that 14 percent (977) of all complaints it received related to sexual harassment.²⁰

Israeli groups are working to promote gender equity in employment.

During their talk with the IWN director, the AAUW delegates examined several IWN programs to help women overcome discrimination and inequality in the workplace. These programs include

- a hotline offering legal counseling, support, and intervention for women facing gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace;
- litigation initiatives that combat discrimination in the workplace through precedent-setting court cases;
- legal representation for women to help increase the enforcement of existing legislation on women's rights in the workplace; and
- advocacy at the local and national levels, including initiatives on policies and legislation affecting women.²¹

III. Education

In Israel, women enjoy equal access to education. A 2000 amendment to the Women's Equal Rights Law states, "Any woman and man have the equal right to an existence in human dignity, including equality ... in education." According to the IWN, in recent years women's enrollment in higher education in Israel has surpassed men's. Women make up the majority of undergraduate students (55 percent), master's students (57 percent), and doctoral students (53 percent).²² Yet, despite these promising numbers, women in Israel still face formidable educational barriers, including gender, racial, ethnic, and cultural stereotypes.

Women in Israel are underrepresented in the STEM fields.

Although a majority of university students are women, they are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in higher education, where there is significant gender segregation by major. According to the IWN, women are more likely to pursue paramedical and education and teaching-related subjects, where they currently make up 80 percent of students. As in the United States, however, only 26 percent of students in traditionally male subjects such as engineering and architecture are women. In electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, and computer engineering, female students account for less than 10 percent of students.²³

This disproportionate representation, of course, strongly affects faculty recruitment. As the delegates heard repeatedly, some universities find it difficult to attract female faculty members in the STEM fields. At the Weizmann Institute, for example, women are well represented in the life sciences, but there is only one woman in the physics department.

Universities are helping to empower all women in Israel.

In their visit to the University of Haifa, the AAUW delegates gained a broader perspective of Israel's vision for the future. All members of Israel's population—Jews, Arabs, Druze, and immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union—come together at the university to study, research, socialize, and share knowledge. For women in particular, the university provides a place where traditional roles can be broken and personal empowerment achieved through higher education.

Delegates examined one program housed at the university called KIDMA, which seeks to advance the status and improve the lives of all women in Israel through personal and professional development. KIDMA (which means "progress" in Hebrew) offers courses, mini-courses, symposiums, lectures, seminars, and workshops on issues related to the advancement of women.²⁴ Courses have been developed, for example, to educate Ethiopian women about domestic violence, to open a dialogue between Arab and Jewish women, and to educate high school girls about the Israeli law banning violent gender relationships. These courses are available to both university students and the public.

IV. Violence against women

Violence against women in Israel is increasing.

During their travels, the delegates heard reports that in recent years violence against women has increased in Israel. According to the IWN, a national hotline operated by the Women's International Zionist Organization received nearly 3,000 complaints (73 percent of the total complaints received) of violence against women in 2008, compared with just over 2,400 complaints the year before. These complaints included reports of physical and emotional violence (42 percent), physical violence (39 percent), financial-based violence (5 percent), and sexual violence (3 percent).²⁵

As in other countries, reported statistics of violence in Israel do not necessarily reflect the full magnitude of the problem. Often, offenses are not reported, particularly not to the police. The IWN estimates that only about 25 percent of female victims report violence to the police.²⁶ Currently, there are 13 domestic violence shelters serving approximately 700 women and 1,000 children in Israel.²⁷

V. Reproductive rights

Pregnant women and mothers experience discrimination in the workplace.

Although there is specific legislation to protect the rights of pregnant women and mothers, these women often experience discrimination and unfair dismissal in the workplace. The Employment of Women Law (1954) prohibits an employer from terminating a pregnant worker or reducing her work hours because of her pregnancy. An employer also cannot fire a woman during maternity leave and for a specified period after her return to work. The law does, however, allow the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to grant an employer a permit to discharge a pregnant worker if the discharge is unrelated to her pregnancy.²⁸

Despite the existence of these laws, delegates heard alarming stories of women who had been fired for having a baby or for pursuing fertility treatments. Nurit Tsur, director of the IWN, told delegates that, despite the laws prohibiting retaliation against pregnant employees, discrimination against pregnant women can be a major barrier for working women, and they are often fired either before or after childbirth. Tsur added that women are sometimes harassed in the workplace in an attempt to make them quit. Examples of harassment include taking away a woman's computer, moving her office to the basement, or reducing her responsibilities.

According to the IWN, employer requests to dismiss pregnant workers are also on the rise. In 2008, employers filed about 1,600 requests either to dismiss or to reduce the positions of pregnant women and women undergoing fertility treatments—a 26 percent increase from 2007. Dismissal permits were granted in more than 650 cases (41 percent). In January and February 2009 alone, 252 requests were submitted, an 88 percent increase compared with the same period during the previous year.²⁹

Leaders from IWN also reported that the organization sponsors a phone line that provides counseling for women who experience work-related discrimination. In 2009, the overwhelming majority (90 percent) of calls to the IWN phone line dealt with discrimination and dismissal during pregnancy or fertility treatments and during or just after maternity leave.³⁰

Abortion rates are declining.

A 1977 Israeli law requires all women seeking abortions to get approval from hospital committees and for the terminations to be conducted by licensed gynecologists in recognized medical facilities. The women must satisfy at least one of four criteria:

- They are older than 40 or younger than 17.
- The fetus was conceived out of wedlock or from illegal sexual relations.
- Continuing the pregnancy will likely endanger the life of the woman or cause her physical or emotional harm.
- The fetus is likely to have a physical or mental defect.³¹

In 2008, hospital committees approved 98 percent of all requests for abortion, and 19,594 abortions were performed.³² The abortion rate in Israel decreased by 10 percent between 2000 and 2008, a rate roughly comparable to the widely reported decline for the same period in the United States.

Delegates received mixed messages about abortion in Israel. Some were told that abortion is not a major issue because all women have access. Others, however, learned that women who have an abortion sometimes experience backlash from certain conservative and religious groups.

VI. Conclusion

This paper presents major findings from the AAUW delegates' eight days in Israel. As in other countries, despite established laws to ensure gender equality in various spheres of life, in practice equality between Israeli men and women remains somewhat elusive. Although women in Israel have equal access to education and account for the majority of higher education students, they are more likely than men to pursue traditionally female subjects and are less likely to pursue fields like engineering.

About half of all women in Israel work, but women's experience of the workplace can be very different compared with that of their male colleagues. Women are more likely to be employed in "female" occupations such as education and social services that offer little prestige and low pay. Israeli women also encounter a glass ceiling that limits their opportunities for advancement. Even in education—where women make up the majority of workers—female teachers are more likely to work at the less prestigious elementary level, whereas only a quarter of senior faculty members in colleges and universities are women. Furthermore, women are also underrepresented at the highest levels of the civil service and in politics.

A main goal of the delegation was to facilitate dialogue between women in the United States and Israel about the barriers facing women and girls in Israel. The delegation learned that, as in the United States, in Israel a number of factors hamper women's progress in education and the workplace. These include a lack of support and resources to help women balance work and home responsibilities, the glass ceiling that limits their advancement, and more overt forms of harassment and discrimination. However, various women-focused groups in Israel are working to overcome these barriers. Their work mirrors AAUW's efforts in the United States to provide educational programs, resources, and support to help women and girls break through these barriers. This discussion does not end with the delegates' return to the United States. AAUW looks forward to continued dialogue and exchange with women in Israel and in other countries as we seek ways to promote gender equity across the globe.

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