

Counting women

There are signs that in the current campaign, parties are recognizing feminine clout

By Judith Cantor

IT'S LATE December, and hundreds of women and a handful of men are crowded into an auditorium in central Tel Aviv to listen as the heads of most of the main political parties solemnly professed their commitment to equality for women.

When Shaul Mofaz, chairman of the opposition Kadima party, former deputy prime minister and former IDF Chief of Staff, notes that women now head the three major parties, the audience interrupts him. “We want a prime minister, too,” the crowd calls, quite pleased with themselves as they use the feminine form.

And when Limor Livnat of the Likud-Beytenu party, currently minister of Culture and Sport, is late for the debate, the crowd pointedly disperses without waiting. “We don’t have to take that from anyone,” says Oshrat Markowitz, 25, a student at Tel Aviv University. “In these elections, women matter.” Indeed, the fact that almost all of the main parties have sent their top candidate to the debate sponsored by the Israel Women’s Network, one of Israel’s foremost feminist organizations, is an unprecedented sign that in these elections women do, in fact, count.

An international study, published in October 2012, ranked Israel in 70th place in terms of the proportion of women in public office – far behind developed nations such as Australia, Canada and Sweden, but also embarrassingly trailing nations such as Senegal, Mozambique and Ecuador.

But now, all of the parties – except, unsurprisingly, the ultra-Orthodox – are vying to prove that they have included women on their lists. In Meretz, one-half of the realistic slots are held by women; in newcomer Yesh Atid, headed by Yair Lapid, it’s 40 percent; in Labor, 30 percent, and in Likud-Beytenu, about 20 percent.

Three of the major political parties are headed by women – Shelly Yacimovich heads Labor; Tzipi Livni leads the centrist Hatnua party; and Zahava Galon

heads the leftist Meretz Party. A fourth, new and little known party – Da’am, an Arab-Jewish workers’ party that just may turn out to be the dark-horse surprise of the elections – is also headed by a woman, charismatic Asma Agbaria Zahalka. Furthermore, for the first time, there are relatively few formerly high-ranking military men in prominent positions on the lists.

And there are other signs that the parties are recognizing the women’s clout. Highly decorated Maj.-Gen. (res.) Uri Sagi was forced to withdraw his candidacy for a slot on the Labor Party list, because of, according to media reports, an alleged sexual harassment complaint made against him by a subordinate during his military service years ago.

A coalition of women appealed to the Central Elections Committee to disqualify ultra-Orthodox parties, including Torah Judaism and Shas, because they undemocratically ban women from their slates. The committee did not accept their appeal, but the point was made through the media attention. The ultra-Orthodox candidates were pushed into defensive statements about “how much they respect and value women.” Subsequently, a group of self-defined ultra-Orthodox women opened a Facebook page, claiming that the demand that Jewish women remain in the background is a deliberate misinterpretation of religious law, designed to maintain men’s power and calling on ultra-Orthodox women not to vote for the ultra-Orthodox parties. “After all,” they write pointedly on their page, “modesty doesn’t seem to matter when we leave our homes to make money for our families so our husbands can study Torah.”

There’s been some feminine street theater, too. Merav Michaeli, an avowed feminist publicist who is No. 3 on the Labor list, deliberately jars her listeners’ ears as she addresses mixed audiences in the feminine, rather than the accepted masculine, tense. And the two most controversial candidates in this campaign – Miri Regev,



No. 21 on the Likud-Beytenu list, and Haneen Zoabi from the left-wing Arab Balad party – are women.

Some of this is most likely a reaction to the attacks on women's equality over the past few years. After suffering through segregated buses, increased demands for women's seclusion and "modesty," the attacks on Women of the Wall, removing pictures of women from billboards and advertisements in response to ultra-Orthodox threats, and murders of women due to "family honor" – women are demanding to make their voices heard.

And the growth of sophisticated feminist NGOs has also played a role. But, without a doubt, the increased prominence of women and women's issues in these elections can be attributed to a deliberate, strategic effort by a cohesive group of savvy women, supported by American funds. In an unprecedented effort, 13 Jewish women's funds in the US joined with three funds in Israel to award a collaborative grant to a new partnership of seven prominent women's organizations in Israel.

THIS IS not the first time that Israeli feminist organizations have formed alliances. Most recently, feminist groups ran a successful campaign against raising the mandatory retirement age for women (see "Fair and equal," *The Jerusalem Report*, September 2011). But these were ad hoc collaborations. This time, the US-based Jewish Women's Collaborative International Fund has awarded a two-year, \$150,000 grant to Itach-Maaki, the lead organization of the new "Bringing Women to the Fore: A Feminist Partnership," known in Hebrew as "Shutafot" and intended to be a long-term cooperative effort of eight leading women's organizations in Israel.

"We are a diverse group of organizations, and we don't all agree on everything. But we certainly do agree on gender mainstreaming, and each group contributes its expertise – legal, economic, occupational, and so forth – to create an effective campaign on all levels, from individual voters to party platforms," explains Dorit Abramovich, coordinator of Shutafot.

The award was granted shortly before the elections were announced, and the group

sprang quickly into action. Within weeks, Shutafot issued a statement of 16 principles, worded as demands from all of the parties, which, taken together, present a clear set of principles for gender equality and social

and NGOs. The term was first coined as a concept following the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in 1995.

Through savvy connections with the media and use of social media, Shutafot was able to generate widespread coverage and attention to the principles. And while none of the parties integrated the principles in their entirety into their platforms, most did at least include a commitment to equal pay and enforcement of legislation against sexual harassment.

Shutafot avoids any positions that could be construed as partisan. "The classic divisions between right and left have become less relevant for women," says Abramovich. "When we campaigned against raising the retirement age for women, for example, we worked with Knesset Members from both the right and the left."

The principles have affected the Arab parties as well, Khawla Rihani, director of Economic Empowerment for Women, one of the members of Shutafot, tells *The Report*. "We have made it clear to the Arab parties that if they do not include women on their lists and gender issues in their platforms, we simply won't vote for them."

"These elections are just the beginning," says Keren Shemesh-Perlmutter, director of Itach-Maaki. "By insisting on gender mainstreaming, we are making it clear that women will not be ignored and that decision-makers must take a gender perspective into account in all of their policies. Sure, some politicians may merely be paying lip service to our vision – but the promises of today will be the policies of tomorrow."

Abramovich sees the principles as a continuation of the mass demonstrations calling for social change that rocked the country over the summer of 2011. "The form of the protests has changed," says Abramovich, "but the goals didn't die out. We have transformed them into strategic campaigns."

Does this mean that what is commonly referred to as a gender gap – a real difference between men and women in the way they view politics and how they vote – is coming to Israel?

The answer is unclear. In other Western countries, women tend to be more liberal.



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justice in Israeli society.

Shutafot states, "The advancement of gender justice and economic-occupational equality is the basis for the creation of a new public order, in which the rights, dignity and safety of women, who make up 52 percent of the public in Israel, become central in vision, policy, legislation and budgeting."

Some of the demands relate specifically to women, such as the demand for enforcement of equal pay and a reduction of wage gaps, and enforcement of legislation against sexual harassment. Others reveal a vision of a more just society, such as the demand for equal opportunity in employment without discrimination on any basis, for the establishment of a non-profit pension fund for all, and a raise in the minimum wage.

"As feminists, we have moved beyond anachronistic demands for formal or numerical equality. We are no longer merely seeking fair representation. We are talking about gender mainstreaming," Abramovich tells *The Jerusalem Report*, referring to the demand to integrate the aims of gender equality and women's rights into all agendas, policies and practices of governments

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Feminist funding

In the recent elections in the US, for example, the number of women who voted for Barack Obama was 20 percent higher than among men. In Israel, in contrast, if there has been a gap, it has been in the opposite direction: 58 percent of right-wing voters have been women, in contrast to 42 percent of men, according to data from the 2009 election.

But recent research says that this may be changing. According to Naomi Chazan, former deputy speaker of the Knesset and currently head of the School of Government and Society at Tel Aviv-Jaffa Academic College, “As long as they are in traditional roles, women have tended to support traditional parties. But as women challenge the system, we can expect to see changes in their political values. They become more concerned about issues of the economy and social justice – such as unemployment, social and educational gaps, and health care. Parties that will respond to these concerns will get their votes.”

FURTHERMORE, CHAZAN tells The Report, “Contrary to trite stereotypes, women are actually less emotional and more issue-oriented than men in their voting decisions. They are more interested in the practical issues, even if they are not necessarily overtly ‘feminist’ or ‘classic women’s’ issues. Women are more interested in daily lives than by the rhetoric of the Iranian threat.”

Shari Eshet, director of the Israel office of the National Council of Jewish Women, one of the members of the Jewish Women’s Collaborative International Fund, a contributor to Shutfot, asserts, “I believe that this is the first election that the voters – men and especially women – are really looking at social issues. We won’t know until after the elections if gender is a deciding issue, as it was in the US in the gendered vote against the Republicans. But I do believe that we are beginning to see a change.”

A 2009 poll by Channel 10, taken only one month before the elections showed that women made up a majority of the 25 percent of undecided votes. But when male competitors began to treat Tzipi Livni, then candidate for prime minister from the Kadima Party, with disdain, women responded. “The attempt to belittle Livni as a candidate for prime minister because she is a woman pushed the campaign into the arena of gender. In fact, it heightened women’s awareness of gender issues,” says Hanna Herzog, professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University, and the Academic Director of the Civil Society forums at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in Jerusalem. “Livni garnered some 7 percent more among women than Netanyahu, giving her the lead.”

And that’s also relevant today, Herzog tells The Report. “When women are undecided about candidates, the gender factor can make a decisive difference regarding whom they’ll vote for.” ■

For Barbara Dobkin, The Jewish Women’s Collaborative International Fund, composed of 14 women’s foundations in the United States and three in Israel, is a critical step towards true feminist funding. Dobkin is one of the most prominent Jewish feminist philanthropists in the US and heads her own foundation, the New York-based Dobkin Family Foundation. In Israel for the board meeting of the Dafna Fund, an Israel-based feminist foundation, she tells The Report, “In the Jewish community, there are women funders and there is some women’s funding, but there is very little feminist funding.”

By feminist funding, she explains, she refers to “women who think differently than men, who are committed to women’s best interests, who give money strategically to advance equality. And women who realize that because women get so little of the pie, we have to pool our resources and collaborate rather than compete.” The \$150,000 grant awarded by The Jewish Women’s Collaborative International Fund to “Bringing Women to the Fore: A Feminist Partnership” (known in Hebrew as “Shutfot”) is, Dobkin notes, “unprecedented anywhere in American Jewish philanthropy.”

While feminist philanthropy in the US has been developing for decades, it is only over the past 15 years that a Jewish women’s philanthropic movement has been growing. Today, there are some 20 Jewish Women’s Foundations throughout the US, and the movement is expanding as women, many of whom are involved with their local Jewish federations, seek to play a more central and hands-on role in the decisions regarding funding allocations and the issues they address.”

However, each Jewish Women’s Foundation is separately incorporated. The Collaborate International Fund, established in early 2012, grew out of the decision by several feminist professionals to increase communication among them, including a monthly conference call. “We began to perceive ourselves as a group, and to think about the effect we could have if we would pool our resources,” says Rebecca Garrison, Associate Director, Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York. Garrison co-leads the collaborative with Jennifer Elvey Schnepfer, Assistant Director of Jewish Women’s Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago.

Most US-based Jewish feminist foundations award grants both in the US and in Israel. Their decision to make a concerted grant to the Israeli collaborative, notes Nancy Schwartz-Sternoff, a prominent New York-based consultant, was spurred on by attacks against women’s equality. She refers to the attacks on eight-year-old Na’ama Margolis in Beit Shemesh because she wasn’t dressed “modestly,” the attacks on Women of the Wall, gender-segregated buses and the banning of women speakers from a conference dealing with advances in gynecology. Unfortunately, she says sardonically, “It was perfect timing.”

In allocating grants, says Dobkin, we usually ask each group, how are you different and unique. But this time we decided to ask them to think about what they can accomplish with strategic partnership. And it is a sign of the maturity of the Israeli feminist movement that they could put away their identity politics and work as a coalition.”

Most American Jewish women, Dobkin concludes, are still not involved in progressive funding and many progressive Jewish women funders are not involved in the organized Jewish community. “I am incredibly thrilled by this. I know this is the beginning of something bigger – more funds, more involvement, and more commitment to equality for women.”

J.C.