

Female Representation in Israeli Politics

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Brief Analysis

While divisive, former Israeli Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked is a force to be reckoned with. Since 2012, when she joined the religious, right-wing Jewish Home party as its first secular member, Shaked has positioned herself as a champion for conservative causes and developed a reputation for tenacity, hawkishness, and effectiveness as a legislator. Indeed, during her term as Minister of Justice, Shaked has not only appointed hundreds of conservative judges, including six supreme court justices, but has also played a major role in promoting Israel's controversial Nation-State Law. As a result, in recent years, some have actually come to speculate that she could eventually become Israel's second female Prime Minister.

Nonetheless, even on the right, Shaked's ability to promote her ideological agenda has not made her universally popular. For example, when interviewed last month about whether it would be appropriate for Shaked to lead the United Right, a recently formed bloc of conservative parties, influential rabbi Shlomo Aviner expressed considerable reservations about the former Minister of Justice. Notably, Aviner insisted that "the complicated whirlwind of politics is not for women."

Despite the respect Aviner commands among a large portion of the demographic Shaked sees as her base, however, it would be a mistake to see his comment as representative. After all, following a brief negotiation, Shaked did end up at the helm of United Right. Yet Aviner's words are a public expression of the discrimination women continue to face in Israeli politics. While far more prevalent in the Israeli political landscape than ever before, women remain underrepresented in Israel's government and are often confined to lower-ranking positions.

Female Representation in the Knesset

Gender equality is far from realized in Israeli society overall; women in Israel earn on average 35 percent less than their male colleagues and are grossly underrepresented in leadership roles across different sectors and in local government. When it comes to the proportion of female legislators in the Knesset, Israel's House of Representatives, Israel perennially lags behind the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member country average for female legislators, which as of 2017 is only 28.8 percent. Moreover, while Israel was the third country historically to democratically elect a female head of state with the election of Golda Meir in 1969, a comparison of the rates of acting female parliamentarians across 193 countries in 2019 lists Israel as 54th worldwide.

Ironically, these numbers actually reflect a significant improvement over the past few decades. Although between 1961 and 1999 the number of acting female Knesset Members (MKs) never rose above twelve, or 10 percent of acting MKs, representation surged between 1999 and 2015 from 14 to 29 female MKs. The 2015 elections continued this upward trend, with female MKs eventually occupying 36 out of 120 seats (30 percent of acting MKs) after the retirement of several male MKs during the 20th Knesset session, allowing Israel to temporarily surpass the OECD average.

Nonetheless, while the number of acting female MKs has consistently increased with each of the four legislative election held between 2006 and 2015, this upward trend was reversed in 2019, when only 29 women were elected to serve in the Knesset. Thus, for the first time in over a decade, the number of acting female MKs actually sunk. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's failure to form a coalition has triggered elections just five months after the previous ones, it is possible that an upward trend will re-emerge. Yet even if the growth in the number of female MKs is renewed following the next election, it is unlikely to have an impact on the percentage of women in leadership positions within the Knesset, which historically has remained consistently low.

Female Representation in Knesset Committees

The Knesset committees, including twelve permanent and several temporary committees, operate in tandem with the Knesset Plenum—the Knesset's central body, whose seventeen chairpersons, except for one, have been all male. The responsibilities of the committees, which are central to the Knesset's work and enable its functioning, include overseeing most of the legislative process and supervising the work of the Israeli government.

The assignment of Knesset members to committees is determined by negotiations between the different parties and in accordance to their size. Regardless of the identities and stances of the parties present at the negotiation table, however, talks almost always result with women underrepresented in or absent from the committees seen as most important. By the time of the dissolution of the 20th Knesset for example, only one out of the fifteen members of the prestigious Finance Committee was a woman.

And while the share of female MKs in Committees is slowly rising as their general numbers increase, it is still relatively rare for a woman to become a Committee chairperson. Throughout the Knesset's history, at most three female MKs have ever simultaneously lead Permanent Committees, including the traditionally female-led Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality, with one or none being more common.

Women in the Israeli Government

The gap between men and women is even more pronounced in the Israeli executive branch: while in 2017 the average percentage of women who held ministerial roles (including deputy ministers) in OECD countries was 27.9, that year only 19 percent of Israeli ministers and vice ministers were female—making Israel 28th out of 35 OECD member countries and 100th out of 188 in a global ranking by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

In truth, the exclusion of women from ministerial roles in Israel has been acute. Between 1949 and 1995 for example, only five women served as ministers in the Israeli government. And while to date, thirteen more women have taken on these roles, the percentage of female ministers in the Israeli government remains just 7.3 percent.

In addition, although the current 34th Government of Israel included a record breaking five female ministers until the departure of former Minister Sofa Landver in 2018, most women in ministerial positions are responsible for ministries considered to be second-tier, such as the Ministry for Environmental Protection. Furthermore, despite Tzipi Livni's tenure as head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no women has ever been appointed to head the other three most prestigious ministries, namely the Defense, Finance, and Interior Ministries. Women are also often absent from the Security Cabinet, Israel's most prominent ministers' forum, which deals with security threats and foreign affairs and carries great influence over the government's policies.

Women in Political Parties

One major factor contributing to the ongoing gender disparity in government institutions is women's status in political parties. To date, the 18th Knesset (2009-2013), which included three parties led by women (almost a third of the Knesset's parties at the time), remains the Knesset with the highest number of female party chairpersons. Meanwhile, out of the eleven parties participating in the upcoming September election, only the United Right is led by a woman—Shaked. If, as polls predict, Shaked's party wins enough votes to enter the 22nd Knesset, she would be the fifteenth woman to lead a party that has passed the electoral threshold in Israel's history. However, only four women in Israel's history have led parties that have won ten seats or over.

Furthermore, the candidates lists of the two most prominent parties participating in the upcoming election—the Likud, which holds primaries and Blue and White, which doesn't—do not include women in their top five slots. And while prior to the dissolution of the 21st Knesset, two out of the top ten spots in each parties' candidates lists were occupied by women, Likud's May merger with a with a smaller party meant that Minister of Culture and Sport Miri Regev remains the only women in the largest party's top ten candidates list. Yet even Regev, despite her high profile, is absent from the Likud's election campaign. Meanwhile, female candidates at Blue and White have recently held a meeting to discuss and express frustration over their low placement in the candidates list, but were eventually unable to do anything to change the situation.

Over the years, some Israeli political parties have chosen to tackle the problem of representation by reserving seats in their candidates lists for certain segments of the population, including women. But while this practice has been somewhat effective in increasing the number of female representatives, it has also at times acted as a limitation: in some cases, women who performed well in primaries were relegated to lower numbers in their parties' list to indirectly ensure that in practice, the number of female candidates in a list was no higher than the number of seats that was reserved for them.

Of course, while the record of most parties is far from perfect when it comes to gender-based discrimination and sexism, there are particular challenges with female representation in Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) parties. To date, only one Haredi woman has ever been elected to Knesset, and though some Haredi women are working to try to increase their representation in national politics, the Sephardic Shas and the Ashkenazi United Torah Judaism—which in the previous election won eight Knesset seats each—adamantly refuse to admit women to their ranks. In fact, following a recent supreme court verdict that required United Torah Judaism to allow female representation in the party, one party member noted that “even the small handful of women who discuss the lack of female representation in the party know that this [situation] isn't about to change in the next few decades.”

Challenges Ahead

While reaching a state where female representation in the government reflects the overall share of women in society would be a worthy goal in and of itself, the additional benefits of significant female representation in positions of power are also well documented: most notably, female parliamentarians are more likely than their male peers to promote women's interests and to focus on education, health, welfare, gender-based discrimination, poverty alleviation, and domestic violence. Furthermore, some research suggests that nations' economic performance tends to improve when women are at the helm.

It appears that a majority of Israelis are at least intuitively aware of the advantages, or in any case, the fairness of gender parity. For instance, according to a recent poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), 52 percent of Israeli Jews believe it is important for the candidates list of the party they support to include women in places that would give them a realistic shot at entering the Knesset. Moreover, a different study published by IDI finds that 67 percent of Israeli Jews and 38 percent of Israeli Arabs would want the funding of political parties to depend on

proper representation of women in their candidates lists.

But while a significant percentage of the public may welcome the presence of women in the Knesset, female politicians still face a long road ahead. Indeed, women trying to advance their career as elected officials often find themselves at a disadvantage against men early on in their political careers. Men on average out-earn them, are more likely to have wide professional networks, and do not face as much social pressure to prioritize their roles as family caretakers.

Furthermore, in a society widely preoccupied with security matters, female soldiers' considerable underrepresentation in military combat roles and exclusion from many elite Israel Defense Forces (IDF) units have serious ramifications for women in politics. Female politicians thus frequently find themselves trailing behind former IDF generals trying their hand at politics; they can also be sidelined by men who—without any impressive military background—are more easily able to present themselves as security experts due to gender stereotypes.

Looking ahead, these pressures are only more likely to increase with the expected growth in support for Haredi parties. While the anticipated surge in percentage of the ultra-orthodox in Israel's population over the next few decades will probably translate into more seats for Haredi parties, the fragmentation in Israeli politics already makes it very difficult (though not impossible) to form a government without them. Accordingly, Shas and United Torah Judaism wield fairly significant influence over policy decisions and neither has a strong motive to cave to pressures to allow women to join their lists.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the Haredi parties' strength could also allow them to successfully resist legislative initiatives aiming to increase female representation. Already, Shas and United Torah Judaism have objected to numerous bills seeking to punish or reward parties based on the number of women in their lists and force parties to accept some minimal number of female candidates. It thus remains up to each individual party to decide whether or not to reserve places for women and to try to increase the number of women in their lists. It is also the duty of powerful female politicians to ensure that they add new cracks to the glass ceiling.

After dropping in the wake of last April's election, the number of women voted into office has the chance to rise once again in the upcoming "do-over election" on September 17. In the context of Israeli politics, it is the individual parties that possess the greatest ability to increase female representatives' presence in the Knesset and access to senior roles. Thus, influential female politicians like Shaked should exert pressure on individual political parties to reserve seats for women and to ensure that their female members are not sidelined by their male peers, while individual reform-minded political parties should continue to work on creating gender parity within their lists as an example for future Israeli reforms overall. ❖

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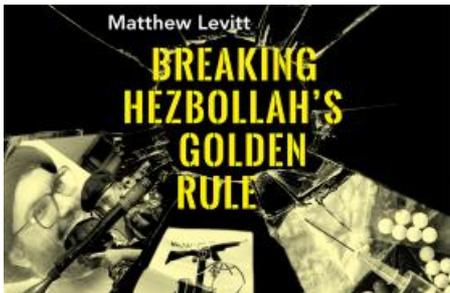
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