



Women's Rights in Israel

When one thinks of the Middle East, gender equality is not usually a feature that comes to mind. Yet in Israel, the equal status of women can be traced back to the very foundation of the Jewish state in 1948. The Israeli Declaration of Independence states that Israel “will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.” This legal guarantee of rights and freedoms has allowed women to be fully integrated in Israeli society and play a key role in politics, business, science, sports, art and culture.

In Israeli politics, women have led the way as members of the Knesset, heads of political parties, and ministers in the government. The name Golda Meir, Israel's fourth prime minister and the third female head of government in modern history, is still revered throughout the world. Tzipi Livni, former foreign minister and vice prime minister, currently heads the largest party in the Knesset. And last September, Shelly Yachimovich beat four male competitors to become the leader of the Labor Party, the second woman to hold this position.

Women are also a central part of the Israeli judicial system. They comprise 51 percent of all judges and 44 percent of all lawyers, and Israel's Supreme Court is headed by a woman, Dorit Beinisch. But Israeli women fill positions of authority long before they enter politics or choose to pursue law. At the age of 18 they are already required to enter military service, where their equal status was enshrined in law in 2000. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) recently named its first ever female major general, Orna Barbivai, who heads the IDF's Human Resources Directorate.

Many of the traits needed for successful leadership in the military transfer to management positions in the business sector. It is thus no surprise that women have made a great deal of progress in the Israeli corporate world. Ofra Strauss serves as Chair of the Board of the Strauss Group, an international food and beverage company based in Israel. Galia Maor, President and CEO of Bank Leumi, Israel's biggest and most profitable bank, was named one of the world's “100 Most Powerful Women” in 2007 by Forbes Magazine.

The accomplishments of Israeli women in science and research have garnered global recognition as well. Perhaps the most extraordinary achievement is that of Ada Yonath, winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Yonath is the first Israeli woman to win the prize, the first woman from the Middle East to win a Nobel Prize in the sciences, and the first woman in 45 years to win the Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

There is always room in Israel, as in other countries, for further progress toward full gender equality. Nonetheless, the embracement of female success in the Jewish state stands in stark contrast to the institutionalized discrimination women face in the rest of the Middle East, and is a hallmark of a society that we here in America can be proud of.