



Middle East Spotlight

Women's Contributions to Israel

The celebration of International Women's Day on March 8 is an important opportunity to reflect on the tremendous contributions of women to Israeli society.

The equal status of women in Israel can be traced back to the very foundation of the Jewish state in 1948. Israel's Declaration of Independence enshrines equality for both sexes, and this core value is protected by numerous statutes. Legally protected and publicly empowered, women are fully integrated in Israeli society where they play a key role in politics, business, science, sports, art and culture.

In Israeli politics, women represent 24 percent of all members of the Knesset—a higher percentage than in the United States Congress—as well as heads of political parties and ministers in the government. Golda Meir, Israel's fourth prime minister and the third female head of government in modern history, remains revered throughout the world. Tzipi Livni, former foreign minister, vice prime minister and leader of the opposition, founded Hatnuah in 2012 and continues to lead the political party (currently part of the Zionist Union) in the Knesset.

Women are also a central part of the Israeli judicial system, comprising nearly 54 percent of all judges and more than 44 percent of all lawyers. Three of the last four presidents of the Israeli Supreme Court (equivalent to the U.S. Chief Justice) have been women—Dorit Beinisch, Miriam Naor and Esther Hayut. The equal status of women was enshrined in law in 2000, when the Equality amendment to the Defense Service Law established the equal right of women to serve in any role in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). In 2011, the IDF named its first-ever female major general, Orna Barbivai, the second-highest rank in the Israeli army, and a record number of women served in IDF combat roles in 2017.

In the corporate world, Ofra Strauss serves as Chair of the Board of the Strauss Group, an international food and beverage company based in Israel, as well as the Chair of the Israeli-America Chamber of Commerce. Rakefet Russak-Aminoach, 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 2015 by Forbes Magazine. More than 40 percent of the top management at Bank Leumi and heads of three of Israel's leading banks are also women.

The accomplishments of Israeli women in science and research routinely garner global recognition. In 2009, Israel's Ada Yonath won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Chemistry—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.

Despite Israel's role as a regional and global leader in women's rights, the Jewish state continues to face challenges as it strives to achieve gender equality. Many Ultra-Orthodox and Arab-Israeli women face unique difficulties; in response, the prime minister's office has prioritized programs to support the integration of women from these sectors into the workplace. While challenges remain, during this special month, we can take pride in the influential role and contributions of Israeli women.