Militarization and Gender: The Israeli Experience

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There are many factors that lead to gender inequality, and in a country such as Israel which was once, inaccurately, believed to be egalitarian, there are still additional, perhaps unique factors. Not least of these is the disproportionate influence of religion and, in particular, an archaic religious establishment wielding a good deal of political power (despite the very small size of the religious population). Perhaps the most insidious factor impacting on gender relations, however, in a country such as Israel, is the militarization of society.

In a situation of prolonged armed conflict and the chronic absence of peace, accompanied by a chronic fear of war or terror, the military as an institution assumes a central role. With this role, come the norms and values of the military. This is clearly the case for Israel, which has been in a virtual state of war since its inception, and indeed even before. It is difficult to describe just how central an institution the military is in Israeli society and in the lives of almost all its citizens. Given the compulsory service for Jewish citizens, male and female, almost all of the Jews in the country – and many non-Jews, on a voluntary basis – pass through this institution. For the new immigrant, the army is a major vehicle for education and integration into the society; for the vast majority of Israelis it is part of the life cycle. At age eighteen one is inducted into the army, and it is there that one experiences what amounts to the last stage of socialization, emerging from adolescence to adulthood. Men then continue to serve, regularly and actively, throughout most of their adult lives.

Yet this central and socializing institution of the military is the quintessence of a patriarchal institution, reinforcing and perpetuating the stereotypical role of women as subordinate, subservient and superfluous. For this is the manner in which the army relates to women; at the very least it is the message the army emits from the months preceding the draft to the (unequal) mustering out grants it pays. In the year prior to the draft, the various branches of the army court the boys, appearing in local high schools, competing with each other to attract the best recruits. No such courting takes place with regard to the girls. The different approach is evident even in the letters sent out for the pre-registration of seventeen year-olds. Then, it is far easier for girls to obtain an exemption from service than for boys. This fact accounts for a 15-20 % difference in the numbers going into the service. Following a far shorter basic training, girls serve far less time than the boys, and they do virtually no reserve duty – as distinct

from the near lifetime of active reserves expected of the men. These distinctions in themselves deliver a most important message about the worth of women in comparison with men. This message, however, is amplified many times over during the period of required service, both by the nature of the tasks permitted or accorded women and the attitude, and behavior, exhibited toward them during this period.

Status in an army is determined by one's relationship to combat. In the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), men are the only sex that can serve in combat positions. The reason most often given (though not officially) for excluding women from combat positions is that women might fall prisoner and be raped. This is an explanation that certainly exemplifies and reinforces the stereotypical view of women as vulnerable and in need of protection – ignoring the fact that men too may be subject to atrocities and indignities as prisoners.

This is not to say that some "status-bearing" positions are not open to women; indeed the closer a women's task is to an actual combat position, the higher her status, albeit after that of her fellow male soldiers. The majority of women conscripts, however, are employed in clerical or service positions and as such viewed by their male commanders and male colleagues alike as generally unnecessary for an army, at best a source of warmth and comfort for their otherwise Spartan existence.

Nor is the situation any better in the professional army, where women may not rise above a certain rank, and, more importantly, women cannot hold a field command – which is the prerequisite for advancement to all but one of the highest positions in the army. Through the work of feminist organizations in the country, the rank of the head of the women's branch of the army was raised to brigadier-general; prior to that and for all other women officers, the glass ceiling remains at the rank of colonel.

A break-through on the issue of women in combat positions, or at least combat-like positions, was achieved early in 1996. This came in the form of recruiting women to Border Guard units, the main force dealing with terrorism. The border guards, however, do not belong to the army but rather to the police force. Moreover, they are perceived by the public as less educated, less important and less respected than the army. Just as women serving in the police has not helped the image or status of women, it is doubtful that this change, permitting them combat-like positions in the Border Guards, will be more successful. Nonetheless, it may represent a psychological step towards equality.

A far more significant step was the 1995 Supreme Court case in Israel brought by the Israel Women's Network and the Association for Civil Rights. This was the case of Alice Miller, a young woman who possessed a civil aviation pilot's license and a degree in aeronautics but was refused permission to take the qualifying tests for the pilots' course when inducted into the IDF. Following a public battle, including futile appeals to the President of Israel, Alice Miller took her case to the courts. There it was ruled that the air force must make appropriate arrangements to permit women to become candidates and, if qualified, enter the pilot training courses. Since that decision tens of

women have applied and steadily increasing numbers have already begun these courses.

One may argue that the road to take is not the road of militarization, seeking combat positions or equality with men in the military. Indeed, as the Israeli army under universal service has grown beyond that which is necessary, it has been proposed – by the army – that women no longer be called upon to serve. The IDF is ready to do away with women's service because it views women as expendable, non-essential, of little to no worth. Many feminists support the idea of relieving women of the burden of serving, particularly in the present circumstances both of the nature of women's service in the IDF and the use of the IDF in what most feminists if not most Israeli women (or men) perceive as unjust Israeli occupation over the Palestinians. Certainly there is much to be said on the issue of pacifism and feminism which I shall discuss below. It may be argued, however, that given the centrality of the institution of the military in a society at war, however repugnant war may be, total exclusion from this institution would only contribute still further to gender inequality and the view of women as subsidiary, unimportant and marginal to the society.

Militarism and the negative impact of the absence of peace goes beyond the influence of the military establishment itself. A country in a state of war, by necessity or custom, values the male child above the female. The male is our potential defender; he may be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice for our benefit and safety; he has a special, critical role to play in and for our society. This may indeed be positive in cultivating a sense of self-worth and pride in boys and young men; what message does it give girls? Moreover, such a situation inculcates and venerates "military" traits: strength, force, aggressiveness, bravery. That is, the very traits generally associated with masculinity or the male stereotype.

In addition, the presumed superior qualities developed in the course of a military career, coupled with the status accorded the professional soldier in a country at war, provide privileged positions for the ex-military man upon his return to civilian life – advantages unavailable to women. Coming out of the professional army, men are "parachuted" into senior positions in business, administration, government, and especially politics. The ex-general is extolled and admired not only for his devotion but for qualities of leadership, organization skills, assertiveness and any number of other traits associated with high rank. Moreover, he is considered an expert, with experience and knowledge, on the subject that has priority over all other topics in a society at war: security. The subject of security, upon which women cannot have either the expertise or experience of the Israeli male, is what makes the ex-officer valuable to a political party, to the parliamentary committees that are viewed important and to the tasks considered important by the media.

Not only have ex-generals permeated Israel's political life, it is even the participation of ex-generals and ex-officers that render legitimacy to the peace movement in Israel. Israel may be the only country in the world where the mass peace movement (Peace Now) was founded (in 1978) by reserve officers and soldiers coming out of combat units. Exemplifying their intent, the women

officer among the founders was denied public acknowledgment at the time because, as a woman, her military background did not accord her the expertise and therefore legitimacy that was being emphasized by the organizers. That situation has since improved with that particular movement, and a smaller but important movement specifically of former high-ranking officers, the Council for Peace and Security, founded in the 1980s has included two or three former women officers (from among the very few who had reached high ranks) on a more or less equal basis (more or less meaning they are less known to the public and given virtually no publicity by the organization, which prefers to emphasize the ex-generals in their ranks).

To the list of advantages accruing to men from their military service one might add the phenomenon of the old boy network created by the army, mainly by reserve duty, which helps men in many areas of society. Reserve duty plays an additional role in providing advantages to the young male soldier that are unavailable to the young women soldiers. My reference is to role models. The eighteen or nineteen year old recruit is in constant contact with men from all walks of life who are doing their reserve duty – engineers, psychologists, artists, writers, lawyers, doctors, professors. This contact provides role models throughout their service. Inasmuch as women do virtually no reserve duty, the young woman soldier does not have the benefit of similar but female role models. Here too there is a message, to the young male and the young female soldier, regarding which sex is skilled, valuable, important.

Women as well as men tend to internalize the message conveyed by all of the above factors. Especially in time of war, psychologists have reported, women tend to feel guilty that they are saved from the danger and sacrifice demanded of men. In time of war, according to a study conducted during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, women are forced back into the most traditional roles of providing solace, care-packages and the like, to their fighting men (Bar-Yosef & Padan-Eisenstark 1977: 134-145). Confined to home because of the closure of schools in time of crisis, they are still further excluded from decision-making bodies as these bodies contract in times of war or crisis. At the same time, prolonged military conflict – in our the maintenace of a long and violent occupation – legitimizes the use of violence, leading to a rise not only of crimes of violence in Israel but also, and in particular, violence in the home.

To all this one might add the perhaps less insidious but nonetheless debilitating problem characteristic of societies in a state of war: they have a particular set of priorities. Gender equality is not high on this list of priorities; women's issues are deemed less than secondary, certainly less urgent than the struggle at hand and, therefore, capable of awaiting solution. Together with the power of the religious establishment in Israel, this may be one of the main factor delaying progress toward gender equality.

Thus, there is a connection between the quest for gender equality and the quest for peace, that is the effort to end armed conflict and the militarization of society that accompanies such conflict. This may indeed be the link between women and peace, if there is in fact such a link. Certainly peace would reduce if not eliminate a powerful barrier to equality in Israel. This is not to say that

pacifism is a natural attribute of women. From a feminist perspective, the linkage of pacifism with women appears to accept and reinforce the stereotypical, essentialist view of women as possessing attributes which render us more peaceful, more moral, more caring than men. And this is often traced to our capacity for motherhood. The psychoanalytical school of feminism has suggested that there is, indeed, a basis, in infant development and early childhood, for a tendency in women to be more empathetic than men; Carol Gilligan has found similar gender differences in relation to moral issues without necessarily explaining their origin (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982).The question is, are these intrinsic attributes of women, or are they the result of socialization, that is, a socialization which is different for women than for men. On the other side of the question, the fact that there are many women, notably in the political arena, who are less peaceful than men or, we might say, more like men, exhibiting qualities such as aggressiveness, does not prove any particular theory.

The dilemma remains. Women have indeed been drawn to the peace camp for many reasons, not necessarily intrinsic to their nature as women, but, nonetheless, possibly for reasons derived from their particular situation as women. It may well be that women, who are themselves oppressed as a group, denied self-determination and freedom – and power – of the type available to men, empathize more directly with the oppressed, the victim. This is one possible explanation for the flood of women to the peace movement in Israel during the Palestinian intifada of the 1980s. Women do not benefit from, nor do they usually advocate, the concepts of "the glory of war", heroism, male bonding and the like. In interviews conducted among Jewish men and women in Israel during the period of the intifada, we found women more likely to see only the losses, the pain, the sorrows of war rather than even the pragmatic idea of necessity.[1]

Nonetheless, research in Israel has been equivocal on this point. Studies conducted in the United States, Canada and some European countries in the 1980s did find some differences between men and women on questions of the use of force, negotiations, willingness to compromise, opposition to capital punishment, and other measures (Bourque & Grossholtz 1973: 255-266; Lansing 1983; Evans 1981: 210-221; Frankovic 1982: 439-448).The differences found, however, were not great, leaving the issue open (for some) as to the statistical significance of the findings. A colleague and I undertook a similar research project in the 1980s in order to determine if, in a society under prolonged conflict such as the Israeli-Arab conflict, gender socialization might be different, producing attitudinal results different from those found in the U.S., Canada and various western European countries. Would the situation of prolonged conflict eliminate the differences between men and women, suggesting the importance of socialization, or would we find there were indeed differences as in the other countries, suggesting a more essentialist (though not necessarily essentialist) view. Our findings, however, were not conclusive. The first study we examined, conducted in Israel in the early 1980s, did indeed find women slightly more willing than men to compromise and negotiate rather than employ the use of force. On a whole series of related questions, men scored some-

what higher than women on what might be called a scale of militarization (hawkishness). The gender differences on these questions increased the greater the number of years of education; the gap also increased when the variables of marriage and of parenting were added. Men and women both exhibited greater dovishness with these variables, but women significantly more so than men. The variable of religiosity also produced a gender difference, but in the opposite direction: the more religious the more hawkish, particularly among women. However, a second survey, conducted by us in the late 1980s during the intifada, found virtually no differences in attitudes between Israeli men and women on the same or similar questions. Only on one question and in relation to one variable were there significant differences: women were more fearful than men; single women were more dovish than married women or men altogether. One explanation may be that the Israeli population as a whole became more dovish, that is, willing to compromise and end the conflict, during the intifada. Thus the gender gap may have been eliminated by the change that took place among the male population. Another explanation may be, however, that there are simply no significant differences between men and women on these questions. Such a conclusion is suggested also by the absence of a women's vote in Israel with regard to elections to the Israeli parliament (the Knesset), including the election of 1996.

Women are socialized differently from men in Israel, and women clearly suffer from the militarization of society in a way that men do not, but Israeli women do not appear to be more peace-loving than men. This would seem to be an indication both of the power of the conflictual situation and the absence of intrinsic differences – motherhood notwithstanding. It is tempting, for a feminist perhaps, to believe that women are peace-loving, even if such an attribute is a product of socialization, including culture and education, rather than an attribute intrinsic to women. One might well prefer to see such attributes in men as well as women. The only way to reach this, however, is through change of the values and norms of our societies as a whole.

It was with an eye to this type of change, linking the pursuit of peace with feminism, that a group of Israeli and Palestinian women created the Jerusalem Link in the early 1990s. In what is called a joint venture for peace and the empowerment of women, Israeli and Palestinian women view dialogue as a key to change and the resolution of conflict. Clearly there are also men engaged in dialogue between enemies. There are also women who reject dialogue and any idea of compromise. It has been our hope, and to a large degree our experience, however, that communication (at least), if not understanding, and the ability to overcome demonization of the enemy are somewhat facilitated by our mutuality as women and the mutuality of our oppression as women in patriarchal societies. Such affinity may not be sufficient to bridge the abyss of enmity and fear that have accrued for generations in our region, but it is a starting point that can reduce the sometimes apparently insurmountable barriers we face.

The operative word is "reduce" rather than eliminate, for our class, ethnic, religious or national identity can be as strong if not stronger than our gender

identity. The basis of the Jerusalem Link has been to build on our gender identity, and in our efforts to empower women each in their own community and to introduce mutuality in order to open the way to dialogue. In the Jerusalem Link, we began the dialogue for the same reasons men did: in response to the conviction that the official leaderships would not or could not communicate with each other despite the overwhelming need, on both sides, to end the conflict. We chose women's dialogue (often in addition to mixed dialogue) primarily because we believed as feminists that we would be able to build on gender identity. We also sought to give women a voice in communities in which women were generally excluded from the decision-making bodies – in Israel as well as the Palestinian community.

Dialogue began at the elite level and was designed to break-down the stereotypes and demonization both sides had created about the other. The most important task initially was to overcome our mutual suspicion, namely, the Israeli view of the Palestinian as terrorist, only; the Palestinian view of the Israeli as soldier with gun poised to kill, only. The advantage we had as women is that this view of the other was far less salient – an Israeli women sitting across a room from a Palestinian did not necessarily evoke the image of soldier cum deadly weapon; similarly the Palestinian women did not necessarily evoke the image of bomb-throwing terrorist. Nonetheless, national loyalties and with them suspicion built over decades of hostility and bloodshed do not, and did not, necessarily crumble before feminist consciousness.

As women socialized in a particular way, in both our societies, our inclination was to avoid our differences, even to ignore them, lest confrontation destroy the possibility of cooperation. Thus, in order to avoid destroying the dialogue, contact was virtually suspended in times of acute crisis between our two societies (such as the period of the Gulf War in 1991). Yet the key, we discovered, was to face and accept our differences, and in so doing, respect the integrity of the other side, the enemy side. Practically as well as symbolically, we maintain our independence, as two sovereign groups bound by a common goal, working separately and together.

A second problem that derived from our being women, in addition to the tendency to avoid confrontation, was the existence of a certain vulnerability within our communities. This was a vulnerability born of powerlessness or the precariousness nature of our positions of power insofar as any of us had such positions. There was, therefore, a tendency toward caution and the avoidance of bold decisions or innovative positions so as not to "get ahead of the camp," that is, the formal male leadership of our respective parties and publics.

In theory, at least, we as women had somewhat of an advantage over men with regard to grass roots support, for we had (particularly on the Palestinian side), large grass-roots women organizations through which to reach the public. Yet here too, being too far ahead of our publics was a factor of concern given the fact that both our societies are accustomed to receiving their political signals from male leaders. Thus, cooperation at the elite level progressed far more rapidly and effectively than at the grass-roots level. Yet it is essential to go beyond the formal agreements reached at the elite level in order to give such

agreements a basis for implementation and stability. On both the Palestinian and Israeli sides, this is a more difficult task, for it is at the grass roots level that we encounter the phenomena of "difference" and resistance, conflicting identities and traditions, in their strongest forms.

The task is, therefore, difficult, and the challenges are great. Particularly as both societies are moving from the path of peace, as a result of the 1996 Israeli elections, and returning to the mode of militarization and force. It is now that we must call upon all our resources and mutuality as women to preserve the understanding that had been achieved, to overcome the increased difficulties between our communities and within our communities, in the realm of women's rights, in the realm of human and national rights. Success in one can be affected by or impact upon success in the other; indeed they may be integrally connected.

Note

1. Unpublished research conducted by Naomi Chazen and Galia Golan in a project on "The Attitude and Behaviour of Israeli Women on Issues of War, Peace and Conflict Resolution."

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