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THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY OF WOMEN IN ISRAEL

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Preface

Feminist ideas were imported into Israel in the 1970s, in the wake of the Six-Day War. The military victory in 1967 elicited feelings of solidarity among Jews all over the world, drawing many new immigrants to Israel, especially from affluent western countries. Among the young migrants from the Anglo-American countries were women who had been exposed to feminism. Bringing with them ideas about women's equality and liberation that had developed during the late 1960s in the "Women's Lib" movement in the U.S., they initiated grassroots activity among Israeli women. That is how second-wave Israeli feminism took its first important steps in the domain of the struggle for women's rights.¹

A movement was founded, and slogans such as "liberation," "sisterhood," and "women's rights" were voiced in speeches and written on the signs held up at demonstrations. The participants

in a series of annual feminist conferences included women from most sectors of Israeli society. There were Israeli Palestinian women, American Jewish migrants, religious and secular women. The overwhelming majority could be defined either as Ashkenazi women (of European Jewish background) or as Mizrahi women (of Arab-Jewish background).² The feminist movement was not large, but those who participated were enthusiastic and devoted. They felt confident that women's liberation was nigh.

It was not long before some of the women who thought they were struggling "shoulder to shoulder" for the same cause, on an equal level with their sisters, realized that there were those in the movement who enjoyed privileges that others were denied. These feelings of deprivation were shared especially by the Mizrahi and Palestinian women. They discovered that there were events and meetings to which not everyone was invited, that they were receiving selective information

and slowly being pushed to the margins of the movement. Their voices were being silenced. As one of them put it:

What do they [the Ashkenazi women] know about what it means to be a Mizrahi woman? A woman with many children, religious? They close their ears to us. They are patronizing. What can one say! How can you even talk with them about our regular harassment – an unrequited love. ... They gave you all the reasons in the world to make you feel a stranger ... No opportunity to open your mouth. There is nobody to talk to anyway. A club ... of feminist Neturei Karta [an exclusive sect of Ultra-Orthodox Jews] – most of the time even the language is different. A club for immigrants where the domain and language is English.³

The Mizrahi women tried to bring up the issue of ethnic exclusion, but it was dismissed as irrelevant to the

feminist struggle.⁴ Many women began to drop out.

In the early 1980s, after the first decade of second-wave feminist struggle in Israel, the movement was almost exclusively based on Ashkenazi women activists and focused largely on issues of concern to the upper classes. The relationship between the small Mizrahi and Palestinian groups that remained in the movement and the larger group of Ashkenazi and American-born⁵ women seemed to replicate the ethnic conflict that had existed between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in the larger society since the early years of the state, and even before.⁶ The Ashkenazi activists determined the objects of the movement's struggles and the subjects of its conferences, and ran them; they gave priority to issues such as the demand for representation of women on the boards of national corporations and political parties, higher education, and the celebration of sexual preference.

This set of priorities subordinated issues of concern to poorer women, many of whom were Mizrahi (or Palestinian). The Mizrahi activists in the movement itself were middle class and often had acquired higher education, but they came from poor families and were sensitive to lower-class issues. They supported the movement's agenda, but their priorities were different. They were interested in issues such as completion of elementary education and the improvement of labor conditions in low-paying jobs that demanded long hours of manual work.⁷ That the differences between upper-class and lower-class women's interests were not always clear enabled the Ashkenazi women to blur their elitist agenda. For example, many feminists invested a great deal of energy, over

the course of a number of years, in the struggle for women's equal access to the pilots' course of the Israel Air Force. They argued that success would open the door to elite roles in the Israel Defense Forces – and, consequently, to advancement in civilian society – for all women equally. In fact, that struggle promoted upper-class women's interests, because such roles were not a realistic option for women who, like so many Mizrahi women, had lower educational qualifications. Moreover, it was not an option at all for Palestinian Israeli women or for most religiously observant women, who are exempted from compulsory service in Israel's armed forces.

On a practical level, Mizrahi and Palestinian feminist activists often found themselves assigned to tasks like mailing or distributing flyers and preparing the signs for demonstrations, rather than representing the movement abroad or speaking for it in the media – tasks that were monopolized by Ashkenazi women. The movement's elitist priorities and the patronizing attitude of its Ashkenazi members towards their Mizrahi and Palestinian colleagues fostered tensions between them. The conflict simmered for several years before it boiled over.

Shaping a Mizrahi Feminist Agenda

In 1994, at the Tenth Annual Feminist Conference in Givat Haviva, a small group of Mizrahi women made a first successful attempt at raising a distinct feminist voice. Disrupting the proceedings, they claimed that the Ashkenazi women did not represent their special concerns and had betrayed the feminist principles of sisterhood,

solidarity, and equality by refusing to sacrifice their upper-class privileges and abusing "feminist solidarity" to promote their own interests. The Ashkenazi feminists rejected these accusations and refused to take responsibility for the Mizrahi women's grievances. A deadlock ensued, and many of the participants, Ashkenazi as well as Mizrahi, left the conference.⁸ Bitter feelings were expressed on both sides, and the movement split.

In the following year, this debate continued to preoccupy feminists and was extensively discussed in feminist circles in many forums: academic, grassroots, political, and the media.⁹ The outcome of the conference impacted harshly on relations among Israeli feminists, and the movement never recovered from the ailments of sectarianism, feeble solidarity, and an upper-class image. However, the split clarified ideological outlines, showing that Israeli women's causes are not monolithic and that women are divided by social factors such as race, class, nationality, and religion. Sectorial interests proved to be stronger than feminist sentiments of sisterhood. The debate at Givat Haviva is now recognized as a significant milestone in the development of feminist consciousness in Israel.

Mizrahi feminists began to meet and very soon organized the First Mizrahi Feminist Annual Conference, held in Netanya in May 1995. It provided a public forum where Mizrahi feminists could talk explicitly about complex experiences of ethnic and gender oppression. They experienced the feeling of being able to talk about these issues, without being required to provide excuses or justifications, as empowering and liberating.¹⁰ The women spoke of historical wounds that were

discovered to have very personal as well as collective aspects, which they compared with the public and formal elements of the Zionist ethos that they had been taught. The resemblance of so many of their individual experiences, as reflected in the talks at the conference, began to form a Mizrahi women's collective narrative that fostered solidarity. A Mizrahi feminism with distinctive outlines was shaping itself around that narrative.

The topics chosen for discussion at the conference reflected two major concerns. First, the participants highlighted the gap between official Zionist history, as taught in Israeli schools, and the personal biographies and histories that they had learned from their parents. Second, they felt a need to expose and publicize the hurtful experiences that they and their parents had undergone as Mizrahim in Israeli society. There was an urgency about obtaining recognition for this history on the part of the rest of Israeli society.¹¹ These Mizrahi women thus were practicing feminism not only by discussing such "feminist issues" as equal pay and other forms of equality with men in society, but also by translating the personal into the political, as the 1970s feminist ethos proposes. Their great thirst to discuss issues of identity politics, Israeli history, and gender and race discrimination was now incorporated into their agenda, which became strongly oriented towards exploring the history of their marginalization and dealing with the identity crisis and economic deprivation experienced by Mizrahim in Israel.¹²

Within the broader context of Israeli feminist discourse, Mizrahi feminism now represented the interests of women who were at the bottom of Israeli society. It had

taken a significant step in the direction of exposing hidden links that make it more difficult for marginalized women to break their silence. This process of feminist social formation did not occur in a void. The poverty and deprivation of Mizrahi women were part of a broad social disparity that had existed in Israel since the establishment of the state. However, the intersection between the gender and ethnic experiences of deprivation is not to be understood merely as a combination of two sorts of deprivation; the social forces involved are inseparable but different in substance, and so they thicken and complicate the enclave that the deprived must escape if they are to enjoy equal access to civil and social rights.

But this kind of feminist breakthrough comes only after breaking the silence. As has been found elsewhere with regard to women of color, women feel safer breaking the silence in forums of women like themselves, and that is what the Mizrahi women experienced at the conference. What they were now able to put into words was that for most Mizrahi women, equal opportunities of the sort that Ashkenazi women were already enjoying were still a fantasy. Mizrahi women, as opposed both to Mizrahi men and to Ashkenazi women, labored under compounded conditions of deprivation, and so the struggle they faced was harder. By the same token, the forces upon which they could draw were weaker than those at the disposal of the other two groups, because of their low socio-economic status.

Notwithstanding this feminist emancipating experience, the Mizrahi women were soon to discover that their achievement in breaking the silence was not worth much in the public sphere. I now turn to a

theoretical analysis of the conflict between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi feminists.

Theoretical Perspective of Marginalized Feminists

The pattern of women's hegemonic-subordinate relationships in feminist movements, and its consequences, are not unique to Israel. They have been discussed extensively in feminist literature, particularly in connection with the feminist movement in the U.S. since the 1980s.¹³

The explanation of the split between agents that attempt to generate social change is to be found in earlier ideological analysis of the question of solidarity in social revolution. Jaggar, for example, discusses this issue from a Marxist feminist perspective, in relation to women's collaboration with men in the class struggle against the capitalists. The women workers who joined Marxist movements did so for the promise of liberation in the "post-revolutionary era." In this context, the notions of "liberation" and "oppression" were monolithic; they were not deconstructed into form and practices, or into compounded elements of oppression. For example, oppression resulting from discrimination against people of color was not distinguished from that resulting from discrimination on the basis of gender. Capitalism was perceived as the root of all evils, and so to be liberated from capitalist exploitation was to be liberated from all the other forms of oppression.

Feminists from the margins believed, naively, that it was worthwhile to remain in the proletarian movement and cooperate with male revolutionaries for the

goal of the liberation of all workers, without entering into the differences between gender, racial, and ethnic oppression.¹⁴ Women were expected to collaborate and show solidarity under terms of exclusion and silencing; calls for protest by women activists were met with responses similar to those given to the Mizrahi women when they made their initial attempt to break the silence.¹⁵ The issue of the subordination of women members of the proletariat to men, by virtue of a domestic division of labor that places a disproportionate burden and responsibility on women, remained tacitly suppressed.

In the feminist case, tensions emerged between members of different class and ethnic groups rather than between the genders, as in the Marxist case. The oppression suffered by the subordinate groups in each of these types of social category is qualitatively different. In my opinion, the discussions in the feminist literature of women's oppression by other women on the basis of race, religion, and ethnic origin bear strongly on the case of the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi conflict. African-American women in the late 1970s accused their white sisters of running a feminist movement for women who had it all and wanted more. "Betty Friedan's feminism," they called it – feminism that believed that what is good for white women in America is good for women in the rest of the world.¹⁶ Eventually, these African-American scholars developed the concept of "womanism" as an alternative to "feminism," a term they regarded as racializing them when used by white women.

When both the subordinator and the subordinated groups are women, patterns of oppression are replicated from the patriarchal

world that construes male–female relations. These patterns are practiced by women who might be supposed to be sensitive to the "other," since they themselves have experienced oppression as the "other" of the male.¹⁷ However, the situation in Israel, as in the U.S., demonstrates that women's shared experience of oppression as women does not necessarily make them refrain from being oppressive towards women who are not of their own class or ethnic group; it is not sufficient for the production of solidarity amongst the oppressed. Furthermore, our case shows that there is no difference between men and women where it comes to their functioning in subordinating-subordinated relationships; women who are better off tend to subordinate women who are worse off. In other words, class bonds are often stronger than gender bonds, and the materialistic interests they serve may well secure women's support of males from their own class rather than of women of lower classes or a different race. If women have to decide whom to join, so it would seem, the utilitarian factor will dominate ethical and solidarity motivations of supporting the weak, and they will tend to join the winning rather than the weaker side. For upper-class women, privileges are still more attractive, and retaining them will be preferable to struggling against other women's inequality.

For both feminists and feminist scholars, the message emerging from the historical process described above is that the struggle against women's oppression, if it is to encompass all of a society's women, demands critique not only of gender barriers, but also of class, race, and ethnic privilege across the genders. This last point is related to a more complicated problem in

feminist theory. According to McNay,¹⁸ the autonomous feminine subject is instituted through constraint of the relationship between two dimensions, the social and the psyche, which are kept separated. The social is compounded with the materialistic dimension and the psyche with the genderial, creating a dichotomy between these two dimensions, which are rarely analyzed in the same context. The forces that keep women silenced are concealed in the gap that construes this dichotomy. We should therefore look there, in what lies "in between" these dimensions, for an explanation of the phenomenon of women remaining silenced for so long under harsh conditions of oppression.

It is my contention that women break the silence when the social-materialistic and the genderial-psyche dimensions intersect, yielding political consciousness. For feminist theorists in Israel and elsewhere, this poses the challenge of uncovering the hidden forces that combine to entrap women. It is in the nature of feminist theory to develop in relation to political activism and social processes. In this respect, Mizrahi feminism has pointed the way for feminist scholars and activists in Israel.

- 1 For a detailed account see my article, "Tensions in Israeli Feminism: The Mizrahi Ashkenazi Rift," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24 (2001), pp. 669–683.
- 2 Since 1960, Mizrahi women have numbered at least half of the population of women in Israel and at times have been the majority. However, since the 1970s, when the intermarriage rate between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim rose to 22%, the Central Bureau of Statistics has been unable to provide precise figures; the national census registers only the males of the second generation. I discussed the problem of data gathering and its social implications extensively in "Self Organizing Systems: Wadi Salib and The Black Panthers – Implications for Israeli Society" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991). On the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi rift see my article, "Adatiyut in Israel – A Postmodern Perspective," in I. Gur-Zeev (ed.), *Education and Society*, Tel Aviv 1999, pp.197–232 (Hebrew).
- 3 Bracha Serri, "An Outsider Guest," *Kol Ha'ishah Newsletter*, no. 19 (1983), p. 4 (Hebrew).
- 4 Dahan-Kalev, "Tensions" (above, note 1), p. 672.
- 5 American-born women had a much larger representation in the movement than their proportion in the Israeli population.
- 6 Henriette Dahan-Kalev, "African-American Feminism and Its Implications for Mizrahi Feminist Thought," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, no. 113 (2002).
- 7 Dahan-Kalev, "Tensions" (above, note 1), loc. cit.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 676.
- 9 *Ibid.*; and idem, "Mizrahi Feminism," in Dafna Izraeli, Ariella Friedman, Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui, Hannah Herzog, Manar Hasan, and Hannah Naveh (eds.), *Sex Gender Politics*, Tel Aviv 1999 (Hebrew), pp. 217–266; Vicky Shiran, "The Ninth Feminist Conference," *Noga*, no. 26 (1993), p. 26 (Hebrew); and Mira Eliezer "We Have Come Quite a Distance," *Mitzad sheni*, no. 4 (July–August 1996), p. 25 (Hebrew).
- 10 Dahan-Kalev, "Tensions" (above, note 1), p. 678; idem, "On the Logic of Feminism and the Implications of African American Feminist Thought for Israeli Mizrahi Feminism," *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, 2 (2003), pp. 111–117; and idem, "The Gender Blindness of Good Theorists: An Israeli Case Study," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4 (2003), pp. 126–147.
- 11 Dahan-Kalev, "Tensions" (above, note 1), p. 678. The workshop topics at the Mizrahi Feminist Conference reflected these two concerns. Here are a few of them: "The Children of Yemen – The Unbelievable Thought"; "The Unreachable Past – The Mizrahi Experience as an Influence on Our Identity"; "Where Has Mizrahi Medicine Gone?"; "Mizrahi Women in the Media – The Marginality ... of the *Freikhah*" (*freikhah*, derived from a Moroccan name meaning "joy," is a derogatory appellation for a lower-class young woman); "The Place of Mizrahi Culture in the Curriculum"; "The 1950s *Aliyah* (Immigration) from Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Points of View: The Hope and the Reality"; "The Pursuit of Identity"; "The History of Belly Dancing"; "The Literary Establishment's Attitude toward Mizrahi Women Artists"; "Mizrahi Women in Protest Movements"; "Single Mothers and the Welfare System."
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 679.
- 13 Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Totowa, NJ, 1988, pp. 77–78 ; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center*, Boston, MA, 1984, Introduction.
- 14 Jaggar, *Feminist Politics* (above, note 13), loc. cit.
- 15 Similarly, the conflict with the Palestinians is often invoked when social issues are brought up in Israeli public forums, a response characterized by the expression "Sheket – yorim" (Shut up; they're shooting out there). This has become a mechanism for dismissing "unpleasant" issues from the public agenda.
- 16 Hooks, *Feminist Theory* (above, note 13), Introduction.
- 17 As described extensively by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (English transl. by H.M. Parshley), New York 1989.
- 18 Lois McNay, "Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16/1 (1999), pp. 95–117.