

Militarized Femininity in Israel

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Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has turned Israel into a militarized society that militarizes the femininity of Israeli women. Outsiders often view Israeli women as liberated and equal with men due to “universal military service, the prime ministership of Golda Meir, the Declaration of Independence, and the ‘plough women’ of the pre-state period...” (Jacoby, 1999, p. 383). However, Israeli women have long struggled to obtain equal status and rights with their male counterparts within the confines of the country’s national project (Jacoby, 1999). According to Gila Golan (1997), societies that experience chronic conflict, such as Israel, automatically value men over women because the former are essential for combat. Israel is exceptional in conscripting both men and women for military service, but women have not been able to achieve the same status as men within the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). When soldiers finish their mandatory service, women’s lower status in the armed forces transfers over to civilian life (Levin, 2011). In general, the militarized femininity of Israeli women perpetuates regressive gender norms in both the armed forces and society.

Demographics

Women in Israel are not a homogenous group and are divided by ethnicity, religion, social class and a variety of other factors. Jews in Israel can be divided into several different ethnic groups; the Ashkenazim from Europe, the Sephardim who originate from the Iberian Peninsula and the Mizrahim, who come from majority-Muslim countries in West Asia and North Africa. The Sephardim and Mizrahim often overlap because many Sephardim sought refuge in Muslim-majority countries after Iberian rulers expelled them in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Ashkenazim



were the main pioneers in establishing the Israeli state and enjoy privileged positions in the country, dominating the upper echelons of society. In contrast, most Mizrahim arrived in Israel because their native countries persecuted and/or expelled them in reaction to the Arab-Israeli conflict. At their arrival, the Mizrahim suffered discrimination from the Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli state and today occupy lower social positions. Mizrahi Jews earn less than their Ashkenazi counterparts, are more likely to end up in prison, occupy fewer positions in academia and have never seen one of their own become Prime minister (Goldenberg, 2018). Israel also has an important Arab minority, who are divided between Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Bedouins. There are also hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers in the West Bank. This paper will mainly focus on Jewish Israeli women, though a lot of the issues they face are similar to those experienced by Palestinian women.

Militarized Femininity, Masculinity and Society

The concept of militarized femininity describes how armies depend on women to enact particular roles in order to support military activities, which may or may not involve combat (Brown, 2019). The following roles have been common for women in armies throughout history: camp followers (doing menial tasks to support the army, such as food preparation and laundry), wives, prostitutes, nurses and combat soldiers (Brown, 2019). In general, women's roles are often secondary and meant to support predominantly male soldiers (Brown, 2019). The militarized femininity of Israeli women largely follows this model of assigning women to secondary roles in the IDF that support male soldiers (Jacoby, 1998).



Armies depend on militarized femininity in order to construct militarized masculinity. Militarized masculinity links different constructions of masculinity to military service, though the traits that armies emphasize may differ from country to country (Brown, 2019). In Israel, the IDF is characterized by a hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes “emotional and physical self-control and thrill” for male soldiers (Brown 2019, p. 385). Israeli militarized masculinity is also largely a reaction to the persecution and suffering Jewish people experienced throughout their history – it aims to create strong men (Sharoni, 1998).

Militaries are often associated with masculinity (Brown, 2019) and many female soldiers in the IDF experience it as a deeply masculine space (Levin, 2011). Militaries rely on constructions of masculinity to recruit, conscript, train and motivate men to fight (Brown, 2019). Most Israeli soldiers are conscripted straight out of high school and “young men in particular will train themselves sick in the months before they are called to duty, in order to be placed in the most competitive and prestigious units, which are often also the most dangerous” (Levin, 2011, p. 7).

Militarized femininity in Israel is shaped by the militarized nature of its state and society. From its founding in 1948 to the present period, Israel has experienced armed conflict with its neighbors, terror attacks, armed incursions, uprisings and rocket attacks at both high and low levels of intensity; it now enforces a military occupation of the Palestinian territories. Due to this context and history, the army plays a disproportionate role in the country’s affairs (Golan, 1997). According to the 2017 Global Militarization Index, which measures the importance of a country’s military structure in relation to its society, Israel ranks first as the most militarized society in the world with a score of 911.0. For reference, its regional rival, Iran, ranks 22nd and has a score of



763.7, its American allies takes 34th place with a score of 733.01, and Canada ranks 92nd with a score of 630.49 .

Other global measurements reflect the state of insecurity in Israel and the Palestinian territories. The 2018 Global Terrorism Index, which reports key trends and patterns in terrorism, ranks Israel 41st country most affected by terrorism with a score of 4.758, and Palestine 31st with a score of 5.330. For reference, Iraq is ranked 1st as the country most affected by terrorism with a score of 9.746 and Canada took 57th place with a score of 3.527. The Global Peace Index, which measures the peacefulness of states in 163 states, ranks Israel as the 146th most peaceful state in the world with a score of 2.764 and Palestine as 141st with a score of 2.621. For reference, Canada ranks as the 6th most peaceful country in the world with a score of 1.372 and Iraq ranks 160 with a score of 3.425 .

Due to its history of conflict, Israel has developed a (often vague) national security doctrine that prioritizes security concerns over civilian issues (Herzog, 1998). This security doctrine persists despite Israel's military dominance over Palestinians, its economic power, and the acknowledgment of its rights to exist from its Arab citizens (Herzog, 1998). This doctrine ties Israelis to the IDF, which plays a substantial role in Israeli society (Hauser, 2011). Conscription is mandatory in Israel for Jews of both genders and military service signifies true citizenship for Jewish Israelis (Arab Israelis are exempt from conscription) (Hauser 2011). Most female recruits serve a two-year service versus a three-year service for men (Hauser 2011).

The military, and by extension militarized femininity, is deeply tied to the nation and nationalism in Israel. According to Nira Yuval-Davis (1998), "women play crucial roles in biological, cultural and political reproductions of national and other



collectivities” (p. 28). For this reason, gender relations play a fundamental role in nationalist projects and national collectivities (Yuval-Davis, 1998). In Israel, there is a very gendered social order that serves to sustain Israeli society and its occupation of the Palestinian territories. The conflict subordinates Israeli women to the Zionist project, which has particularly traditional notions of femininity and masculinity (Sharoni, 1998). According to Simona Sharoni (1998), “while men are expected to be liberators and protectors of the Jewish people, women - cast as symbols of the nation, vulnerable and in need of protection - are assigned primary responsibility for the reproduction of the nation and for the transmission of its culture” (p. 25).

History of the Women’s Movement in Israel

To understand the militarized femininity of Israeli women, it is important to look at the history of women’s movements in the country. Women played an important role in the early Zionist movement and the women’s movement was originally deeply intertwined with the national project (Jacoby, 1999). The 1917 Balfour Declaration promised to create a Jewish homeland in the recently settled territory of Palestine. This declaration allowed the Zionist movement to proceed with their goal of having an *ingathering of the exiles* in the Holy Land and creating a new egalitarian society based on social justice, creating a collective, and gender equality (Jacoby, 1999). In reality, female Jewish pioneers had difficulty obtaining complete equality with their male counterparts (Jacoby, 1999). This is notably demonstrated in the gendered roles that Jewish women took in the development of labour, agricultural, and paramilitary movements during the Mandate of Palestine (Jacoby, 1999).



It was mostly men who dealt with plowing and tilling the soil for food crops while women were relegated to work in the domestic sphere (Jacoby, 1999). Jewish men were largely inhospitable to the idea of Jewish women's independent labour, but that did not stop Jewish women from creating their own labour movements (Jacoby, 1999). These female labour movements worked to promote women's work in agriculture, aiming to put female pioneers on equal footing with their male counterparts and help them obtain an equality of duties with them (Jacoby, 1999). During this period, women's labour movements largely aligned themselves with Zionism, but they mostly failed to achieve gender equality (Jacoby, 1999).

The Jewish population progressively increased during the pre-state years, often facing backlash from the native Arab Palestinians, who were increasingly worried about dispossession from their land. Tensions increased between both groups, leading to intercommunal riots and massacres. In reaction to this conflict, Jewish settlers started to organize themselves into paramilitary groups, such as the *Haganah*. The *Haganah* had both male and female members, but women were largely consigned to communications, first aid, and medical assistance until the Arab Revolt of 1936, when they were given the right to guard communes (Jacoby, 1999). Jewish women were also able to later serve in the *Palmach*, the elite fighting force of the *Haganah* (Jacoby, 1999).

In 1948, Israel declared independence, fought its first war against its Arab neighbours and dispossessed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. A large proportion of Jewish women, from both secular and religious backgrounds, fought in the war, more so out of patriotism than for ensuring gender equality (Rosenberg-Friedman, 2003). In September 1949, Israel passed the Defence Service Law, establishing mandatory



military service for women. However, Israeli women occupied an ambiguous position in the army because “no system was ever worked out to clearly define their rights and duties” (Jacoby 1999, p. 389-390). Israeli women largely took on traditional domestic duties in order to support male leadership and early state development (Jacoby, 1999).

Some Israeli Jewish women managed to achieve power, such as Golda Meir, who had been minister of various departments starting in 1949 and was Israel’s Prime Minister from 1969 to 1974. However, the ideal model of Israeli femininity during the early statehood years was the ‘heroine mother’ who was able to produce an abundance of offspring in order to contribute to the national cause (Jacoby, 1999). David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, often encouraged women to have as many children as possible (Jacoby, 1999).

In 1967, Israel defeated Jordan, Egypt and Syria in the Six-Day War, allowing it to occupy the Palestinian territories, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched the Yom Kippur War, invading the Sinai and the Golan Heights respectively, killing roughly 2,600 Israeli soldiers and wounding around 9,000, which were heavy losses for Israel’s then population of 3 million people. Israel drove back these forces, but the war still shocked, angered, and demoralized many Israelis, forcing then Prime Minister Golda Meir to resign.

It was only in the 1970s and the 1980s that the women’s movement in Israel started to divorce itself from the national cause. The disastrous results of the 1973 Yom Kippur War created an atmosphere of dissent in Israel that opened up space for public debate on gender issues (Jacoby, 1999). The Israeli state encouraged women to take on greater responsibility in the army and the labour market (Jacoby, 1999). Israel also liberalized abortion laws during the 1970s after a large and sustained protest movement



(Jacoby, 1999). Women also lobbied for the criminalization of domestic abuse, which threatened many traditionalists (Jacoby, 1999). Israeli women's groups started to increasingly divorce themselves from Israeli nationalism and militarism and to associate themselves with the peace movement (Jacoby, 1999).

The 1982 War in Lebanon led to mass protests from different women's groups against Israeli participation, notably from *Women Against the Invasion of Lebanon* and *Parents Against Silence* (Sharoni, 1998). To give context, Israel invaded Lebanon to fight the Palestine Liberation Organization, but Israeli and international public opinion turned against the war after the Sabra and Shatila massacres, when Israeli soldiers allowed Christian militias to massacre Palestinian and Lebanese civilians.

Women Against the Invasion of Lebanon received a lot of backlash because it was an explicitly feminist movement that condemned militarism and sexism (Sharoni, 1998). *Parents Against Silence*, which was later dubbed *Mothers Against Silence*, received much more public support because it more closely conformed to a socially acceptable embrace of motherhood, care, and protection (Sharoni, 1998). Even then, political figures reproached these mothers for their protests, telling them instead to spend their energy supporting their children in the IDF (Herzog, 1998). The First Intifada (1987-1993) led to greater collaboration between Israeli feminists and their Palestinian counterparts and greater recognition of the link between militarism and sexism in Israel (Jacoby, 1999). The 1993 Oslo Peace Accords further reinforced collaboration and anti-militarism amongst Israeli feminist movements (Sharoni, 1998). However, feminists who try to fight for peace and the rights of Palestinians still face enormous backlash (Natanel, 2012).



Women in the Army

In order to understand the role of Israeli women in the armed forces, it is necessary to look at some important dates. During Israel's early years, the military barred women from many positions, though it opened them up over time (Jacoby, 1999). In 1978, women were allowed to become tank instructors (Jacoby, 1999). However, in 1981, the Israeli military institutionalized a gendered division of labour by ruling that activities such as coffee making and floor washing were legitimate duties of military secretaries, the majority of whom happen to be women (Sharoni, 1995). In 1995, the Supreme Court of Israel ruled that women could become pilots, one of the most prestigious roles in the army, but only after Alice Miller, an aeronautical engineer, brought her case to court (Golan, 1997). Beginning in 1996, the Israeli Border Guard started to recruit women into its forces, however, it was considered less prestigious because it was a police unit and not associated with the IDF (Golan, 1997).

It is also important to look at some statistics regarding women in the armed forces. Only 65% of Jewish women serve in the IDF, while the rest are exempt due to a variety of reasons (Sharoni, 1995). Around 25% of women (often ultra-Orthodox and Haredi) are exempt from conscription due to religious grounds (Sharoni, 1995). The rest are exempt due to marriage, pregnancy, motherhood or unsuitability for the job, which could mean an insufficient knowledge of Hebrew, level of education and/or physical fitness (Sharoni, 1995). Most of these exemptions are granted for Mizrahi women, who come predominantly from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sharoni, 1995). There's also a fairly important contingent of female conscientious objectors who refuse military service, though the exact proportion is unknown (Natanel 2012).



Women only make up approximately 35% of the regular IDF and a large percentage of them are in clerical or service positions under the authority of higher-ranking male officers (Jacoby 1999). These positions include clerks, typists, kitchen workers, entertainers, etc. (Sharoni, 1995). In addition, many female IDF members are loaned out to other government institutions in order to fill shortages of teachers, policewomen, nurse aides, and other positions (Sharoni, 1995). Many of these women serve in bases and areas where there are very few women, or where they may be the only woman (Hauser, 2011). Today, around 92% of positions in the IDF are open to women, though the 8% that they cannot access are largely the ones that allow soldiers to achieve higher ranks in the army (Gross, 2016). Only 2.5% of female soldiers have combat positions in the IDF versus 20% of men (Hauser, 2011).

The IDF is a deeply masculine institution that pushes women to take traditionally feminine roles in the army (Hauser, 2011). Some female soldiers report benefitting from playing these feminine roles, receiving special attention, privileges and treatment due to their gender (Hauser, 2011). These women often strive to be a “civilizing force” and “bring a touch of home” to their bases, providing emotional support for male soldiers (Hauser, 2011). Women in the IDF often act as camp followers, taking care of male soldiers’ physical and emotional needs (Hauser, 2011). Those women do so by baking cakes, doing social work, and providing comfort and a substitute family model for male soldiers (Hauser, 2011).

According to Orlee Hauser (2011), many of these women find performing feminine roles empowering on an individual level, but on a collective level, it weakens their positions as soldiers in the IDF. Many female IDF members also feel that they have to conform to feminine roles in order to contribute to the army (Levin, 2011). When



women in the IDF reject feminine roles and try to move up to traditionally male combat positions, they are characterized as 'dykes' (Levin, 2011). Due to the culture perpetrated within the IDF, women face limited prospects to pursue roles of combat or gain promotion within their line of work.

Another major issue that women face in the IDF is sexual harassment and sexualisation. Although a large proportion of women face sexual harassment, the issue is often trivialized by both men and women (Levin, 2011). Some women do not see sexual harassment as such and see it instead as a form of flattery (Hauser, 2011). When women date in the IDF, others judge them based on the status of their partner, with some members joking about women joining prestigious units to find high-status husbands (Levin, 2011). Sometimes, female soldiers date their superiors (Levin, 2011). Heteronormativity dominates the dating scene, so gay and lesbian IDF members are often assumed to be heterosexual (Levin, 2011). These views and actions blur professional and private boundaries for women in the armed forces.

Women in combat roles are often seen as less desirable dating partners because of their 'dykish' image (Levin, 2011). In addition, Israeli public relations campaigns employ sexualized images of female IDF members to promote the IDF (Sharoni, 1995). An internet search of women in the IDF brings up many sexualized images of female soldiers. *Maxim*, a men's magazine, has had many articles on female IDF members with photos of them in skimpy clothing and provocative poses. In general, the IDF "seems to create an environment in which many women, intentionally or unintentionally, are seen primarily as feminized or sexual objects in either the presence or absence of their attractiveness to men." (Levin, 2011, p. 23).



Women in a Militarized Society

Transitioning to Civilian Life

IDF service is an important stage in young Israelis' transition to adulthood and it often socializes female soldiers into traditional roles (Levin, 2011). Contrary to the popular belief that female conscription eliminates gender inequality, military service actually reinforces a gendered division of power and labour, which transfers to structural inequalities between men and women in Israeli society (Sharoni, 1995). Thus, women's secondary roles in the army leads to them accepting unequal roles in Israeli culture, society, and politics (Hauser, 2011). Since combat experience is linked with prestige that is transferable to civilian life, predominantly, male ex-army officials are able to translate their military accomplishments into material and political benefits after their military service (Jacoby, 1999).

For example, businesses headhunt high-ranking members of the IDF for managerial positions and political parties have recruited generals into important political positions (Herzog, 1998). These men bring their military ways of thinking to their leadership positions, perpetuating the gendered military order and sexist stereotypes (Herzog, 1998). Since there is a blurred line between the military, politics and civilian life in Israel, ex-army officials have been recruited for positions where military experience is unnecessary or even inappropriate, such as managing municipal governments and administering schools (Herzog, 1998). Since women are not part of these "old boys" networks in the military, they often are not able to access high positions and are thus predisposed to accepting men's superior status (Herzog, 1998)



The Homefront, Family and Motherhood

Women's principal role in Israeli society is to guard the homefront, the family sphere, and support their men in the battlefield (Herzog, 1998). Women play a special role as "beautiful souls," symbols of the nation and objects of protection for Israeli men (Jacoby, 1999). Nations are often symbolized as women, who act as markers of their continuity, traditions and authenticity (Jacoby, 1999). Following this logic, Israeli women are meant to support and nurture Jewish families under a patriarchal system (Herzog, 1998). The birth rate in Israel is 3.1 children per woman versus 1.7 children for the rest of the developed world (Kraft, 2018). Many Israeli couples have numerous children due to a desire to replace the 6 million Jews who perished during the Holocaust (Kraft, 2018). This birth rate is also in large part due to fears that Palestinians will outnumber Jewish Israelis and to the need to provide future soldiers for the state (Kraft, 2018). According to journalist Dina Kraft (2018), many Israelis negatively judge couples who have two or fewer children due to the above-mentioned reasons.

In a way, the wombs of Israeli women have been weaponized in order to fight against the Palestinians. The Israeli government provides many economic incentives for large families, often bankrolling fertility treatments (Kraft, 2018). Having a large number of children increases women's dependence on men, creates excessive childrearing burdens for women and reinforces the preservation of the traditional patriarchal family (Herzog, 1998). This pro-natality stance has resulted in some benefits for Israeli women, such as generous maternity leave (Herzog, 1998). However, there has been increasing backlash against social pressures to have many children (Kraft, 2018). In general, this pro-natality stance often makes women's reproduction into a matter of national importance instead of an individual matter .



Being a Jewish state, religion plays a large role in Israel, and each religion has its own court system that determines personal status laws. Orthodox Judaism prevails as the dominant state-supported interpretation of religious law in the country. Orthodox Judaism affects personal status for Jewish Israelis in regard to “political representation, marriage, sexuality, issues of domestic litigation such as divorce, inheritance, and child custody, and other social mores bound to the familial unit” (Jacoby, 1999, p. 392). According to Orthodox Jewish law, Judaism is transferred through the mother, making Israeli women the biological, legal and ideological reproducers of the Jewish nation (Jacoby, 1999).

For this reason, Israeli Jewish women are expected to marry other Jews in order to perpetuate the nation. In cases where Israeli women decide to have in vitro fertilization, they make sure to use sperm from other Jews (Bokek-Cohen, 2017). Also, these women will often try to obtain sperm from elite combat soldiers who served in important military campaigns (Bokek-Cohen, 2017). Because many Israelis feel such a need to produce more Jews, intermarriage with non-Jews, especially with Palestinians, is heavily stigmatized. Extremist groups, such as *Lehava*, hold marches and engage in violent protests against intermarriage between Jewish women and Palestinian men (Cook, 2016). One notable example of *Lehava* protesting intermarriage is their attempt in 2014 to disrupt a wedding between Morel Malka, a Jewish woman, and Mahmoud Mansour, an Arab Israeli (Arad, 2014).

In general, motherhood and family are an overarching theme in the lives of Israeli women, much more so than most Western countries. Geula Cohen, the founder of the extremist right-wing *Tehiya* Party, asserted that “the Israeli woman is a wife and a mother in Israel, and therefore it is her nature to be a soldier, a wife of a soldier, a sister



of a soldier. This is her reserve duty. She is continually in military service” (Sharoni 1995, p. 126). As mothers, Israeli women are expected to support their children during their military service (Jacoby, 1999). In essence, the Israeli state and army have transferred many of the burdens of military service to families and thus to mothers (Jacoby, 1999). Mothers often take time off to visit their children in far-off bases, clean and iron their clothes and provide psychological and economic support (Jacoby, 1999).

They also use their status as a way to gain moral legitimacy and lobby for political causes, whether they be expanding settlements or protesting against military service in the occupied territories (Herzog, 1998). However, this reliance on motherhood for legitimacy is problematic and reduces Israeli women to a limited space for mobilization (Jacoby, 1999). Though the symbol of motherhood is powerful, it does not always transfer into effective political influence (Jacoby, 1999).

Marginalization of Women's issues

Women's issues and social issues, such as health, education and welfare, are often marginalized in Israel due to the dominance of security concerns (Herzog, 1998). This marginalization is reflected in the Knesset, where committees dealing with social issues, which are considered traditionally within the feminine domain, enjoy less prestige and are disproportionately represented by women (Herzog, 1998). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often used to justify the neglect of gender equality and women's rights, which are seen as luxuries that Israel cannot afford, even as detriments to its security interests (Herzog, 1998). Even prominent female scholars in Israel, such as the political scientist Yael Yishai, claim that nationalist and feminist causes are incompatible with each other (Herzog, 1998).



A good example of this is women's lack of upward mobility in Israel due to their inability to fill combat roles. Israel has also enacted neoliberal policies that further diminishes women's socio-economic status (Sachs et al, 2007). The events of the Second Intifada in particular highlight the difficulties of Israeli women, who faced a deteriorating economic situation, health and emotional state and lower well-being (Sachs et al, 2007). Single mothers and women from marginalized groups, notably Israeli Arabs and Mizrahim , faced particularly strenuous circumstances (Sachs et al, 2007). Due to military, police or criminal activities, the possession of firearms is widespread amongst the civilian Israeli male population (Sachs et al, 2007). During the Second Intifada, dozens of Israeli women were killed by male relatives or boyfriends who possessed these very firearms (Sachs et al, 2007).

Conclusions

In conclusion, Israeli militarized femininity serves to perpetuate a gendered social order that severely limits the rights, freedoms, privileges and opportunities of Israeli women. Due to the militarization of Israeli society, Israeli women are socialized to fulfill traditional roles and to support men. In the armed forces, Israeli women suffer from gender discrimination and a lack of mobility. These impediments influence their transition to civilian life, because they have difficulty obtaining the same high-level positions as men. When they start families, they face pressure to marry fellow Jews, have many children, and raise future soldiers. Though some Israeli women have managed to enter positions of power, they are often relegated to less important roles. Some Israeli women have used their motherhood to lobby for certain changes, but it is often their main or only source of legitimacy in the public sphere. Many Israeli women



have become more active in the peace movement, but they often face backlash from a militarized society. Overall, Israeli society has reacted to the conflict by converging “around a patriarchal model of national identity, where women are marginalized to the ends of political power (Jacoby 1999, p. 387). This state of affairs will likely continue for as long as the conflict lasts.



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