

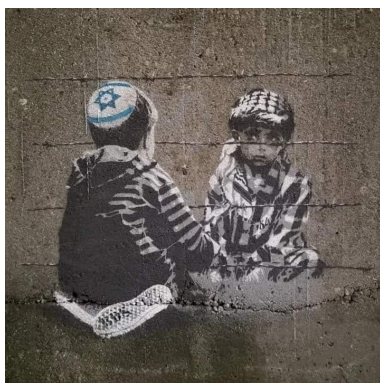
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Women won't solve Israel-Palestine conflict, but feminists might

- Aujourd'hui - Israël/Palestine ou l'inverse - Israël-Palestine -



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In a study published by *The Palestine-Israel Journal*, my review of public opinion data showed only minimal differences between women and men in supporting peace. A strong and thriving feminist movement may be the key to advancing peace, and addressing deep, underlying chauvinism in general.

Sometimes I worry that if I start writing about the state of feminism in Israel, a storm will gather inside me, and a tirade will come pouring out. The post will explode into an uncontrollable, possibly incoherent, manifesto of frustrations.

So I'll start with two specific issues: passing the buck, and the internalization of male-driven worldviews of society, life and the conflict.

Passing the buck might also be called discrimination-denial. The recent series of outrageous incidents coming from extreme elements of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) society makes life easy for Israelis: Everyone can jump on the self-righteous bandwagon against those nasty Haredim who spit on little girls.

I won't be the first to say that the far greater challenge is to look at the reality among mainstream society. I'm not even talking about the putrid political establishment and the shock of having had a rapist for a president. It's daily life, stupid. One guest writer from ACRI questioned government policies that lead to the exclusion of the weakest women from society. But I'm talking about the automatic exemption regular people give themselves – mainstream, non-marginalized, establishment, and men – from exposing and fighting chauvinism. It's as if because they aren't Haredim, the subtle, almost invisible insult, injury, and condescension to women in daily life has nothing to do with them.

I'm talking about women who tolerate despicable attitudes invented by and for men, women who have internalized these attitudes so deeply they don't even know the difference.

Here's what I mean by internalization: I've gotten comments – including from professional colleagues – to the effect that I must be dying to put aside all this nice little career and political stuff, in order to catch a husband and reproduce. Many women I know have no sense of why this is offensive; the notion that a professional peer is violating my personal life (and disparaging my career) would never occur to them. In Israel, a woman's most intimate physical and spiritual parts are often considered public property to be tossed around and dissected at any man's whim. Many women internalize the legitimacy of this invasion of their souls.

They may also legitimize ideas that are simply absurd: I've heard women snicker their agreement with the wacko male mantra that women are terrible drivers, mostly because some women switch lanes too slowly. Never mind that with my eyes closed, I can predict that the murderous psychopaths butchering whole families as they careen across lanes, bearing down on victims, grunting and sneering through their windows as they sail toward their death – or that of others – are men. The data leaves no room for doubt – in 2005, for example, 91% of all lethal accidents involved male drivers (women, who hold 40% of the drivers' licenses, were the drivers in nine percent of such accidents).

The female internalization of male violence, superiority complexes, or patriarchal, machoistic conceptions of reality upsets me the most. But compared to separated sidewalks, it may be the hardest form of male dominance to expose and oppose.

I think this is what lies behind my findings in an article I recently published in *The Palestine-Israel Journal*, in a special issue called "Women and Power." The article, "Gender Myths and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A summary of Differences and Similarities in Israeli Jewish Public Opinion" explored whether women are more likely than men to hold peace-related attitudes, based on public opinion data from a range of surveys.

In some countries, scholarly research has found somewhat higher support among women for various peace-positions, or less militarist approaches to conflict. Two excellent articles summarizing the theories and possible explanations are Tessler and Warriner's 1997 article "Gender, Feminism and Attitudes Toward International Conflict" in *World Politics*, and Tessler and Natchwey's 1999 "Further Tests of the Women and Peace Hypothesis..." in *International Studies Quarterly*.

Those articles found no evidence that women in Israel or other Middle East countries they examined were any more supportive of peace than men (in Israel, their data is from the Jewish population only).

Using fresher data (their Israeli data was from 1989 and 1991), I pored over the numbers (unfortunately, I was only able to look at the Jewish population in this article). Two decades later, there was little change. I found a few differences among male and female approaches to the conflict, but they were not significant or consistent, and were not always in the expected direction. Sometimes women expressed more hard-line attitudes than men.

Here is an excerpt from my conclusion.

The data affirms that there is little genuine or consistent difference between the genders. Yet the slight differences that do appear yield some observations.

The 2007 Ir Amim survey could indicate that women are less inclined to support provocative or unfair policies. In wartime, women appear somewhat more likely to side with policies to end the violence, including the need for long-term non-military solution to the conflict.

At several points, women seem to be more susceptible than men to fear and disappointment: They seemed to suffer greater disappointment by the collapse of hopes following the outbreak of the second intifada; slightly more right-leaning after the Gaza war and the failed September 2010 negotiations than men. Prior evidence offers some support: Arian's study of attitudes toward Iraq's SCUD attacks in the first Gulf War notes that women suffered from fear far more than men (Arian 1995, p. 86). Golan and Chazan's research from 1989 found that there was practically no difference of attitudes — except regarding levels of fear.

I don't love these findings. The scholars above offered some convincing explanations, such as the salience and proximity of conflict as the main factor forming people's attitudes, rather than gender. But I'd like to propose that many women are complicit in behaving according to gender stereotypes, which includes letting fear govern their outlook, but also less critical engagement with politics — I see evidence of this in focus groups among women. I believe that too many women have internalized too many male-dominated narratives, including the relentlessly militaristic approach to the conflict.

Here's my hope: Tessler and Warriner found that attitudes towards feminism and gender equality were much more clearly correlated to peace attitudes. Israel does have a tireless and committed group of feminists — who deserve extra kudos for their struggle against anti-feminist attitudes ("feminist" is regularly used as a dirty word) and female resistance, in addition to fighting basic inequalities and discrimination. I have a dream, that Jewish women, Arab women and all women make equality and respect into a social justice demand. When half a million people demonstrate to support that, I'll test the feminism and peace attitude hypothesis, and pray that it's proven right.

Post-scriptum :

Dahlia Scheindlin is a leading international public opinion analyst and strategic consultant based in Tel Aviv, specializing in progressive causes, political campaigns in many countries, including new/transitional democracies and peace/ conflict research. In Israel, she works for a wide range of local and international organizations dealing with Israeli-Palestinian conflict issues, peacemaking, democracy, religious identity and internal social issues in Israeli society. Dahlia is currently writing her doctoral dissertation in comparative politics at Tel Aviv University. The focus of her research is unrecognized (de facto) states. She is an adjunct lecturer at the Department of Politics and Government at Ben Gurion University. Dahlia writes a monthly column for the Jerusalem Report magazine and is a regular media commentator and guest lecturer.