

Report to:

**THE UNITED NATIONS DIVISION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF
WOMEN**

By:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Part I:

**An Overview of Trends Towards the Achievement of Gender Equality and the
Advancement of Women**

The State of Israel is pleased to present this overview of trends towards the achievement of gender equality and the advancement of women in our country. In the interests of brevity, we will note here only the most significant developments since 1995, as well as those which indicate the trends of progress among women in Israel.

In Israel, more than 100 laws relate, directly and indirectly, to the advancement of the status of women, in the aggregate, they encompass nearly all aspects of women's lives and provide an excellent legal foundation for gender equality. In this report, we note some of the most recent legislation and amendments and discuss their effect on women today.

In March, 1998, marking International Women's Day, the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) voted unanimously to establish the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women. As a statutory Authority, established and maintained by law, this will prove to a vital force for women's equality.

The Authority, established and maintained by law, indicates that the law-makers and the government no longer view the advancement of women as a "women's issue", but rather, believe that gender equality is a challenge to society as a whole, and a goal to which the entire society must make a commitment.

The functions of the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women include formulation of policy regarding gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against women; coordination and promotion of cooperation between state government, municipalities, and others; advising the ministries on the implementation of equality laws; establishment of special programs and services for women which promote gender equality; promotion of legislative measures for the advancement of women and the elimination of discrimination; provision of information and tools necessary for the achievement of these goals to the government. Furthermore, the Authority has specifically been charged by the law to heighten public awareness of violence against

women through use of the educational systems and the media and to advance activities designed to decrease all forms of such violence.

The Authority has established an advisory committee, composed of representatives of all of the governmental ministries and ministries, statutory authorities, and women's groups and NGO's.

The Authority's program for 1999 has included, among other goals:

- *Enforcement of laws relating to women's rights in the workplace, including equal pay, equal opportunities, prevention of discrimination, and shattering of the "glass ceiling".

- *Institution of a Program for Gender Equality in the Schools, currently implemented throughout the educational system, from pre-schools through teacher-training colleges throughout the country. This program is scheduled to run for four years;

- *Consolidation and monitoring of funds allocated to the advancement of the status of women in the various ministries and statutory authorities, in order to maximize efficiency;

- *Initiation of an out-reach program for the early detection of breast cancer among hard-to-reach populations.

- *Establishment of an informative web-site for women.

- *Initiation of a project of informative and educational lectures and programs for civil servants and in the IDF.

- *Sponsorship of a series of literacy projects for women in the Arab and Bedouin sectors; this program is the result of the express requests of the women themselves.

- *Sponsorship of a project of empowerment among single-parent families headed by women, focusing on skills needed for finding and maintaining employment.

In 1996, the Knesset Committee on the Advancement of the Status of Women became a permanent (standing) committee. The Committee has become a catalyst and initiator of numerous important legislative advances, including the presentation and promotion of the bill for the establishment of the above-discussed Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women. In addition, the Committee has frequently been able to focus public attention on issues relating to women's status, position, and concerns.

In the general elections of May, 1999, fourteen women were elected to the Knesset, among them is the first Arab woman ever to be elected to the Israeli parliament. In November, 1999, a 15th woman took her place in the Israeli legislature. This represents a significant increase from the nine women who were elected in the previous (1996) elections.

Despite the polarized character of Israeli politics, the women parliamentarians have been able to form unique cross-party coalitions. Women who represent parties with radically different platforms and worldviews have been able to cross party-lines, even in the face of objections by the "father" parties, in order to act concertedly to uphold women's inalienable human rights and to further gender equality.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak has appointed two women as Cabinet Ministers and a third as a Deputy-Minister.

Furthermore, in the local and municipal elections, two women were elected mayors of large cities in Israel, and the 1998 local elections brought about a 40% increase in the numbers of women serving on local and municipal councils.

We credit much of these achievements in women's leaderships to the active and determined coalition formed by the largest women's organizations, who, like the women members of Parliament, have been able to put aside organizational and ideological differences and to work together to promote women who run for political office and to increase public awareness of, and commitment to, the need to increase the numbers of women elected to public office.

We will briefly note several additional important developments which indicate a nascent gender perspective among Israeli legislators and politicians, and among the public in general:

Violence Against Women: There is extensive evidence that attitudes towards violence against women are changing in Israel. While in the past violence was tolerated and even subtly encouraged, extensive media campaigns, efforts by women's organizations, efforts by men who have established organizations against male violence, and the courageous women who have come forward and publicly accused their attackers have changed this attitude. "Women as Victim" is no longer acceptable within Israeli mainstream culture.

The government has indicated that the campaign against violence against women is a high-priority issue. Several high-level committees are devoted to eliminating violence against women in all its forms, including an inter-ministerial committee, which has proposed mechanisms to enable the many volunteer and official organizations providing services to women and families to coordinate their efforts. In 1997-8, the Prime Minister's office sponsored a national media campaign regarding violence against women, including a National Hotline and Referral Service.

These changes in attitudes are further reflected in numerous social and legal developments:

In March, 1998, the Israeli Parliament passed a far-reaching sexual harassment law, one of the most comprehensive laws of its kind in the world. The law provides a broad definition of sexual harassment, making such harassment both a criminal and a civil offense. Regulations are defined for situations where women are more likely to be exploited or sexually harassed. As the bills sponsors had hoped, the law has also served as a springboard for numerous institutions to begin a process of discussion and awareness among both men and women.

In the past year, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of complaints of sexual harassment; we believe that this can be attributed both to the new law and to the growing public awareness of the subject which the law has fostered.

In 1997, the Israel Women's Network, working with the Ministry of Justice and the Police Force, developed a pilot Sexual Assault Victim Witness Program. Subsequently, a coalition of human rights and women's organizations has been instrumental in bringing to the Knesset a proposal for a far-reaching law to recognize the rights of victims of crimes and offenses. If passed, the law will be one of the most innovative of its kind in the world, and will include provisions for support and assistance, legal representation, the right to be heard before plea-bargaining and sentencing, and involvement of the victim at all crucial junctures of the judicial process. The law is still pending at this time.

In the past four years, Israel's progressive Prevention of Violence in the Family Law was further amended to better meet women's needs, including, for example, a provision stipulating that a court which does not include a prohibition against carrying weapon in an injunction must justify its decision in writing. A Procedural Amendment Law (Questioning of Witnesses), 1995, authorizes the courts to order that the testimony of a complainant in a sexual offense be given in the accused's absence, if the court believes that the complainant or her testimony may otherwise be harmed. Also in 1995, a Family Court system was established, in order to simplify legal recourse with regard to family matters, including violence against women.

In 1997, an amendment to the Penal Law allowed the courts to impose more lenient sentences on victims of severe abuse who have been convicted of murdering the perpetrator of the abuse. While the amendment is not limited to abuse within the family, it seems that this will be among its most important applications.

Israel has continued to expand its services to victims of violence, including Centers for Assistance to victims of rape; shelters and transitional apartments for battered women; counseling centers for male abusers; hotlines for women, including hotlines in the languages spoken by the large numbers of immigrants (Russian and Amharic).

Centers and shelters have also been set up to meet the needs of specific populations, in particular the ultra-Orthodox and Arab communities; in the near future, a mobile violence-prevention unit will serve the Bedouin community, whose women are usually unable, for reasons of culture and distance, to reach services provided in the cities and towns. These projects reflect our recognition that services must be culturally-syncretic and responsive to the particular needs and beliefs of the different cultures represented in Israel's multi-cultural society. Most of the shelters receive 75% public funding; some, including those that serve the minority populations, receive 100% public funding.

In particular, we would like to cite a unique shelter for abusive men who have been removed from the home by court injunction: in this shelter, the men receive group and individual treatment, as well as consciousness-raising and behavior modification opportunities. We are hopeful that this innovative projective will lead to the development of new models and modalities of treatment.

We note with satisfaction that attitudes among the police have changed significantly. Local police officers undergo extensive training regarding domestic violence and, over the past few years, the police have added nearly 180 investigators to their ranks. In addition, representatives from the NGO's and the Authority continue to provide inservice training for police personnel, judges, and others who deal with violence against women.

Women, the Economy and Employment: Israel has extensive legislation which both guarantees equality for women and offers women protection for specific circumstances, such as pregnancy and maternity leave. The Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women has determined that enforcement will now be proactive, conducted through the offices of the Ministry of Welfare and Work.

In 1996, the Equal Pay (Male and Female Employees) Law was passed. Although previous legislation had intended to provide equal pay, the many loopholes in the previous laws had allowed for significant gendered wage gaps to develop; the current legislation will eliminate these loopholes.

The State Service (Appointments) Law (Appropriate Representation) - 1995: introduced affirmative action in the civil service, obligating the Civil Service Commissioner to use all necessary means to achieve the appropriate representation of both sexes in the civil service. A majority of civil servants are women, yet they receive, on the average, lower salaries and are over-represented in the lower echelons of employment. The Civil Service Commissioner has established a unit charged with advancing and integrating women into the Civil Service, including affirmative action policies.

Women in the Armed Services:

The military is a central institution in Israeli society. Since Israel maintains near-universal conscription, military service is a rite of passage and a source of legitimacy and status in adult life. Israel is the only Western democracy with compulsory conscription for women; however, service in the military is highly differentiated along gendered lines.

In response to a decision by the Supreme Court of Justice, the Israeli air force has reviewed its admission procedures and now enables all women who meet the initial requirements to take the entrance exams for pilots' training. Furthermore, the air force has made numerous changes in programming and education in order to enable the female recruits to better-integrate into their units and to enable the previously all-male crews to adjust to the presence of women and the social and hierarchical changes that this entails, indicating a commitment to a gender perspective among the senior military personnel.

In addition, the military has increased the number of positions open to women and publicized its commitment to promoting women officers to higher ranks.

Current heads of the military, in all its branches, have made awareness and elimination of sexual violence and harassment an important and emphasized part of military policy for conscripts and officers alike. All recruits, male and female, participate in a program of empowerment and awareness.

Education, Academia and Research: At the initiative of the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, the Ministry of Education has voiced its commitment to improving gender equality in the school system. A unique program, entitled Equality 2000, which involves educational programs for boys and girls, as well as for teachers, has been instituted in several schools throughout the country. Within the Ministry, a specially-designated unit has been charged with increasing the numbers of girls who choose to pursue technological and scientific studies.

At the level of higher education, there has been a tremendous increase in the numbers of students who wish to study feminist studies and/or topics related to women, and a concomitant increase in research and discourse. Four Israeli universities and numerous colleges have instituted women's studies programs, although these differ widely in terms of structure, institutional recognition, etc. Recent outside grants promise to enable the women's studies programs to assess the best path for their own futures, to establish at least rudimentary departments, and perhaps to obtain University approval for the establishment of cathedras and/or teaching positions.

Part II: Financial and Institutional Measures

2. The Authority has commissioned a gender-perspective review of the current proposed budget and the budgets of the various ministries. This review will be presented to the Prime Minister, as part of the Authority's mandate to advise the Prime Minister on policies relevant to the advancement of the status of women.

3. a & b: As noted above, the establishment of the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women is a critical step towards the achievement of gender equality in Israel. The efforts by the Authority to institutionalize follow up to, and implementation of, the Platform for Action and the National Plan have been described above. The Authority is responsible for the follow-up to all relevant conferences and for the coordination of follow-up efforts to global conferences.

4. Throughout Israel's history, women's NGO's have always played a major role in advancing the status of women in Israel, in changing the public perceptions of women, promoting women's role in the public and private spheres, operating hot-lines for victims of sexual and domestic violence, etc.

Today, it is estimated that nearly 100 women's organizations are active within Israel; nearly 50 additional NGO's deal with women's issues as part of their broader commitment to human rights. These organizations vary tremendously in size, ideology, socio-economic characteristics of their members, activities, etc.

Recognizing the crucial role which women's organizations have played in providing services for women and in bringing issues of concern to women to the public and government agendas, both the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women and the Parliamentary Committee for the Advancement of Women work closely with them. By mandate, the Authority is charged with coordinating the efforts of these organizations, and the larger organizations are represented at the Authority's Advisory Council. Similarly, the Parliamentary Committee, has provided for the regular and on-going involvement of these organizations in its deliberations and in the formation of policy recommendations, legislative initiatives, etc.