Israel’s Political Gender Revolution

The growing crop of female lawmakers measures success one vote—and one piece of legislation—at a time | By Allison Kaplan Sommer

For decades, one woman—strong, stalwart, plainspoken yet grandmotherly Golda Meir—cast a giant shadow over the image of female political leadership in the State of Israel.

The fourth prime minister led the Jewish state at an early point in the country’s history, from 1969 to 1974, a time when elected female leaders in Western democracies were nearly nonexistent. But her ascent left a somewhat misleading impression. Meir’s international celebrity, paired with the drafting of women into the Israeli military and the egalitarian ethos of the early kibbutzim, projected to the world a false notion of gender parity.

In truth, as the number of women in the parliaments and governments of Western democracies steadily increased over the past half century, Israel was trailing behind even many third-world countries. As recently as March 2012, there were 78 countries in the world with a higher percentage of women in their legislatures than Israel.

That picture is now changing, with a gender revolution taking place on Israel’s political stage. Of the 120 Knesset members chosen in the country’s last elections in March 2015, 29 were women. Subsequent turnover has brought the total to 33, a five-fold increase in the past 25 years. For the first time, more than a quarter of the Israeli parliament is female, with women represented at an even higher rate in Israel than in the United States Congress, where they comprise only 19 percent of lawmakers.

The transformation of women in political power in Israel reaches beyond numbers. For most of Israel’s history, the few female Knesset members fit a stereotype. Like Meir, they tended to be older, left-wing party insiders who had spent years climbing the ranks and were considered “one of the boys.” They downplayed their gender and were loathe to openly advocate for women’s empowerment.

The House

Standing with Women of the Wall are (above, from far left) MKs Stav Shaffir, Tamar Zandberg and Michal Rozin; (opposite page, clockwise from top) Israel’s Knesset building; Tzipi Livni topped the ticket of the Kadima Party in 2009; and Gila Gamliel, one of four women in the Cabinet, comforts a Holocaust survivor.
Leaning In Women advocate for more equal representation in the political halls of power.

STAV SHAFFIR
Labor Party

“Real Zionism, my friends, is to distribute the budget equally between all citizens. Real Zionism is to be concerned with the weakest members of society. Real Zionism is solidarity. Not only in war but in the day to day.”

(Israel Prize speech, January 2015)

Stav Shaffir, 31, is a politician for the Labor Party and a digital native with a bright red mane of hair. She regularly uses social media to promote her agenda demanding greater government transparency and addressing socioeconomic inequalities. Shaffir has revealed secret budget transfers that she contends benefit West Bank settlers at the expense of the poor.

The roots of her political career can be traced to the 2011 economic and housing protests that drew half a million to the tent city that she, then a journalist, and a group of activists set up in central Tel Aviv. In 2012, the Labor Party recruited Shaffir, then of activists set up in central Tel Aviv. In 2013, the Labor Party recruited Shaffir, then Itzik said in a digital native with a bright red mane of hair. She regularly uses social media to promote her agenda demanding greater government transparency and addressing socioeconomic inequalities. Shaffir has revealed secret budget transfers that she contends benefit West Bank settlers at the expense of the poor.

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Shulamit Aloni, the left-wing party founded by the late legendary feminist is Meretz, led by Zehava Gal-On. Co-female representatives—three of five—"gender is a factor in politics." have continued to diverge, and "that then, male and female voting habits a wide enough coalition to rule. Since popular vote but was unable to gather portionately for Livni, who won the electoral strength by voting dispro-

One of four women in Netanyahu’s Cabinet, Gila Gamliel serves as Israel’s first minister for social equality. Some of her efforts have been widely praised by feminist groups: She pushed through legislation outlawing marriage before the age of 18 and promoted measures that advance women in the job market. Occasionally, however, she has found herself at odds with socially liberal feminists, most recently in a pitched battle over proposed child custody legislation. Gamliel backed a law that would change the court’s policy in divorce cases of granting au-

e their mothers. Numerous women’s ad-
vocacy organizations and female Knesset members vigorously fought against the measure and eventually defeated it. The battles that involve the coun-

come, and their record of success is poor. The ultra-Orthodox parties United Torah Judaism and Shas—key members of Netanyahu’s coalition—work closely with the Israeli rabbinate, which controls all issues related to the personal status of Jewish women in Israel. “You can move nothing in matters of family law, marriage, di-

She began her political career on the Jerusalem City Council in 2008 and later served as deputy mayor of the city. Her highest-profile battle has been her fight to allow advertising images of women on buses that drive through the city, including ultra-Orthodox enclaves. The mother of four—whose own mother made aliyah from Oklahoma and whose father is of Tunisian descent—headed the nonprofit Mariav Satus, which helps agunot, women whose husbands refuse to grant them a Jewish divorce. Her local success and national profile led Moshe Kahlon, founder of the center-right Kulanu Party, to handpick her for his Knesset list in 2015. She has continued pushing her feminist, social justice agenda, authorizing legislation that increases worker flexibility and parental leave for fathers as well as mothers. Her current crusade is reforming pension laws that discriminate against women.

The political world they don’t know how to swallow me because I am a colorful person and different. I am unpredictable. Who decided that social activists have to be leftists? Sorry, but people on the right also embrace the gay community.”

Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev, 51, had an impressive 25-year career in the Israeli Defense Forces, rising to brigadier general when she became IDF spokesperson in 2005. She served as the face and voice of Israel’s military during the Gaza disengagement and the second Lebanon War. As she climbed the ranks, Regev earned her college and graduate degrees, married and had three children. After the army, she joined the Likud Party in 2008 and, a year later, won 27th—and last—slot on the Likud Party list. In 2015, her popularity led her to the fifth slot. A controversial but staunch ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, she came to her ministerial position vowing to shift budgetary priorities to champion the culture of Israelis of Middle Eastern and African origin. She also launched a campaign to end government funding to groups that “delegitimize the state and support boycotts,” including those that refuse to perform in the West Bank.

For women’s rights as well as rights for women in the political realm. The fund helps women “overcome struc-

tural barriers,” said Gouri, including access to money, media and networks, as they launch their campaigns. While the current number of wom-

In the age of Germany’s Angela Merkel, Great Britain’s Theresa May and the possibility of a President Hil-

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