

EMPOWERING WOMEN AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SPECTRUM OF ISRAELI SOCIETY

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Empowerment of women must not only involve those who are highly educated and skilled but also those at the base of the socioeconomic pyramid. Strategies and techniques derived from the social work profession have been used in Israel to empower women at both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Training, incorporating consciousness-raising techniques and social skills and behavioral training, has been given to women seeking managerial posts in the labor force and involvement in local politics. Disadvantaged women, particularly the victims of domestic violence, have benefited from a multimodal, integrated treatment approach. Raising the base of the socioeconomic pyramid in this way will catalyze advancement at the top as well.

The concept of women's empowerment leads one to think of the feminine elite. However, in the search for new directions for empowering women in society, it is essential to focus on all populations of women, including the most and least powerful.

This article describes new approaches, strategies, and techniques that are derived from the value system of the social work profession and that are directed toward empowering women through consciousness-raising training and treatment. It examines both ends of the female socioeconomic pyramid and discusses the position of the most powerful women in Israeli society—those in politics and in the upper echelons of the labor force—as well as women in the least powerful position—victimized women.

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND THE LABOR FORCE

For women to be fully empowered in society, they must share political and economic control of the power centers equally with men. The image that Israel is a country of

equal opportunity for women was promoted during the beginnings of the state in the late 1940s through the 1960s. Israeli women were seen as pioneers who helped to build the country by working side by side with men in the kibbutzim; they were seen as soldiers who fought side by side with men for independence. Golda Meir had a key role in the founding of the state, and her eventual role as Prime Minister showed that Israel was far ahead of many countries in enabling women to hold powerful government positions.

Today this image pales in the face of reality: 50% of Israeli women are in "pink-collar" occupations (those occupations traditionally held by women, such as teachers, nurses, and secretaries); they earn 70 to 80% of the salaries of men, and they hold very few Knesset seats and are rarely sought as the leaders of political parties or given ministerial posts in the Cabinet. Since 1949, there has been a decrease in the number of female members in the Knesset, from 11 women (9.1%) in 1949 to 7 women (5.8%) in 1988. After the 1988 election, there were no women in the Cabinet among 26 ministers. In addition, Army women have been reduced to noncombatant roles in the armed forces and relieved from reserve

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duty in a society where many top leaders have gained prominence through service in the military.

The inequality of Israeli women is the function of three factors: (1) Halachah or Jewish rabbinical law, which governs marriage and divorce in Israel and limits the status of women dramatically; (2) modern legislation, which at first glance seems to diverge from rabbinical tradition in granting equal rights to vote, to serve, and to be educated, but which still does not grant equality in the area of national service; and (3) opinion and social convention. In regard to national service, it must be remembered that Israel is always in a constant state of war. Since the men fight the wars, women remain at home. Women have no access to military career boosters, such as exemplary service as a combat officer and the "free" managerial training that accompanies their service responsibilities.

Israel's political system is somewhat unusual in that the selected leaders play a less significant role in the public eye than the parties that represent them. At election time, the public votes for a party, with the number of Knesset seats dependent on the number of votes received. During Israel's recent election there were 25 parties (one of which was the Women's Party); many of them, including the Women's Party, did not succeed in gaining even one Knesset seat.

INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

The Israel's Women Network (IWN) is a nonprofit organization made up of women from all walks of life. Its members, however, share one major goal: complete equality and social justice for all of Israel's women. The IWN is a powerful organization dealing with all types of groups and at all levels of society.

The IWN is presently attempting to rectify the imbalance in power by using several social work strategies in the political and labor arenas. The first strategy is to increase the involvement and political engagement of women.

Before the election of 1992, the political committee of the IWN was co-chaired by two women—Yael Dayan (Labour Party) and Nomi Blum (Likud)—who represented the two major political parties in Israel. This tactic was used as a model for power sharing and women's leadership. The committee's board brought all political parties—the left and the right, religious, secular, Zionist—under one umbrella.

The Israel Women's Network began its campaign on a grassroots level. It brought its message to the streets by placing information tables at convenient locations in the main cities of the country. Volunteers at these tables called on women to become involved in the political system, since only through personal and social engagement could change be achieved. Women were given information on how to get involved with the slogan, "Choose yourself a party." Additionally they were asked to sign a petition encouraging the heads of all political parties to ensure equal representation of women on their party lists. Since this campaign was covered extensively by the media, mass communication became a tool to bring the message to the Israeli public and aided the process of change and empowerment.

The second strategy was to render the power centers in society accessible to women and to encourage women to enter into powerful positions within the economic system—serving on the board of directors or in high-level functions in the government—and to use these roles as springboards to top political positions or to assist other women in the economic and political process. The IWN successfully sued the Government of Israel to enable women to sit on the boards of directors of public corporations.

Training programs were developed to aid in achieving this goal. The NORA Institute, a private institute created to assist in empowering women in Israeli society, developed a training program for women who sought managerial posts in the labor force. In this program, women learned about the

status of women in society, raised their own knowledge and awareness, and in groups discussed the status of women in organizations. Each woman was trained to become aware of the progress of her own career as a series of events to which there are elements of choice and which requires careful planning and development. Participants received social skills and behavioral training, both to defend them against exploitation and to enable them to obtain a greater understanding of their own thinking and behavioral patterns. The emphasis was on assertiveness training and methods for dealing with stress. In addition, organizational skills, such as negotiation, decision making, teamwork, and the use of strategies for career advancement within the system, were explored. A dialogue with decision makers in the system on the problems and options for the promotion of women within organizations concluded the training program.

Similar training, based on educational and cognitive psychology, was also used by the political network to aid women in their involvement in local politics and to encourage them to run for municipal elections. The percentage of women in local government has been slowly increasing since 1950: from 4.2% to 8.5%. (Despite the increase in numbers, these low figures do not compare well to those of the United States [20%] and Sweden [40%].) The techniques used were similar: group work on building self-awareness and confidence and training exercises on how to work within political processes and systems. In addition, those women who became candidates within their parties were provided with follow-up support concerning the way to become elected within their own party. This training program was a joint venture of the Ministry of the Interior and the IWN.

POLITICAL PRESSURE AND MONITORING

However, more coercive methods are needed to bring women to the top echelons of power in the labor and political systems.

For example, to implement the 1981 Israeli law on equal opportunities for women in the labor force, each government agency adopted policies aimed at achieving equal opportunities for women in the public sector and a more balanced representation of women in senior management positions. Each government ministry appointed a representative to be in charge of the issue of career advancement for women in that particular ministry; that representative is responsible for preparing annual reports on the increase in appointments of women to senior management roles. This technique of monitoring has been adopted in municipalities as well.

In the political arena, women's organizations met with the heads of political parties to encourage or demand the selection of women for realistic positions on the party lists, thereby increasing their representation in the Knesset. In addition, women from all ends of the political spectrum who were members of the Knesset before the election joined forces under the auspices of the IWN and held a press conference a few months before the 1992 election to demand greater representation of women in the Knesset. These strategies resulted in a slight increase in Knesset seats for women in 1994. Of 120 Knesset seats, 11 are held by women.

Prior to the election, the Women's Network provided written campaign platforms dealing with the empowerment of women to each political party. Issues included greater economic power for women; more women in high positions of public service; greater equality for women in the education and communications fields; providing women in the defense forces more access to promotions; legislation and services for women in distress; and the personal status of women with regard to divorce and other matters of halachah. Parties were asked to make a commitment to these values and principles in order to secure the women's vote, and the Network has left a notable impact on the platform of major parties and coalition partners.

EMPOWERING VICTIMIZED WOMEN

However, these limited political advances will have less influence on the general public than substantial gains for disadvantaged women. Accordingly, this section addresses new methods of intervention for the disadvantaged women, the women at the base of the socioeconomic pyramid. It focuses on treatment approaches for domestic violence, with an emphasis on empowering victimized women.

History of Treatment of Victims of Domestic Violence

Treatment in Israel for battered women developed first within shelters during the late 1970s; group work and support therapy were adopted by mental health professionals outside the shelter setting in the late 1980s.

Individual treatment for battered women in a shelter or similar setting has primarily focused on empowering women, reducing social isolation and dependence, providing social advocacy, increasing assertiveness, and improving self-esteem. The above-mentioned techniques are quite similar to the interventions described for elite women.

Model Treatment and the Integrative Approach

Intervention with victims of spousal abuse has evolved into clearly delineated stages of treatment, using a multimodal, integrated treatment approach. This intervention is based on the desire of each partner to discontinue the violence and enter into agency contracts to terminate violence, which are renewed at each stage of treatment. During the assessment stage, referrals are made for other treatment needs, such as alcohol and drug abuse, medical, and psychiatric treatment. There are three stages of treatment.

First Stage: Attitude Change

The first stage consists of attitude change. It is marked by greater empowerment of women and recognition by men of their actions and their responsibility to change their

behavior.

Women and men are treated separately in parallel groups. The goal for treatment of the battered women is to reduce social isolation and provide a supportive milieu for change. It is common to conduct individual counseling with men at this stage. The goal of treatment for batterers during this initial stage is to increase their awareness of the abuse and to deepen their sense of accountability for their acts.

A new technique now frequently used during the first stage of treatment in both men's and women's groups is the recounting of folk stories. For women, storytelling has been successful in presenting family violence in a non-judgmental way and allowing its female victims to understand that they are not the only ones who are being abused. For both men and women, it facilitates newcomer participation since identification with story characters does not require painful self-disclosure. In addition, the use of storytelling in the group experience reduces defensiveness and helps the group's transition and growth.

Second Stage: Anger Management and Personal Responsibility

Assuming successful completion by both partners of the first stage of treatment, the second stage focuses on anger management and other techniques for handling crisis situations and avoiding further violence. The goal of this stage is to enhance both partners' ability to identify and manage the attitudes and emotions associated with violent behavior. Women and men continue to be treated separately in group settings, and both begin individual therapy as well. Group work is characterized by the use of psychoeducational and cognitive-behavioral techniques, and the use of male-female therapist teams is recommended. Within the context of anger management training, it is common to employ relaxation and tension reduction techniques, "time-out" training, improvement of communications, and assertiveness training.

*Third Stage: Determining and Facilitating
the Future*

The third or final stage of intervention begins with examination of whether violence can and will stop. If therapy has been successful to this point—attitudes and behavior have been changed and the psychosocial roots of the demeaning status of women within the violent family have been understood—conjoint couple or family therapy begins. This therapy emphasizes understanding and changing the dynamics of couple, male, and female roles within the family and developing new relationships and ways of communication. The goal of this stage is to decrease unhealthy, hostile-dependent relationships and to develop non-violent and constructive conflict resolution skills.

If the violence cannot be stopped or either partner chooses to separate, emphasis in this stage is on assisting the women to create new patterns of life by preparation for entry into the labor force, which includes continuing education, becoming economically independent, locating housing, assuming responsibility for household management, and taking even greater responsibility for child rearing and caregiving.

Group support, as well as specific types of individual counseling and in some cases, family therapy for the mother and children, is likely to be considered at this stage. Taken together, the general impact of this intervention empowers disadvantaged women.

CONCLUSION

We must think in terms of empowering not only women of the elite but all women, including those at the base of the pyramid, for they are the great majority of women. In contrast to the earlier feminist idea that empowerment is a result of an ongoing struggle of the female elite, we, as social workers, believe that change must ripple through the pyramid from both top and bottom—economic and political advances on top and a realistic financial investment in the bottom layers. Finally, it is essential for all women to remember that the primary obstacle to women is an anemic feminine self-image, which is shared by both elite and disadvantaged women. Therefore, we women must raise the base of the socioeconomic status pyramid, which ultimately will catalyze advancement at the top as well.