

Economic empowerment and gender discrimination: Contradicting trends in the status of Orthodox Jewish women in Israel

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Orthodox Jewish women in Israel hold a unique and unusual position. On the one hand they are the main breadwinners of their families, and on the other hand they are increasingly discriminated against, segregated from their male-dominated society and institutions, and excluded from the public sphere.

The unique political and legal situation in the State of Israel in the last 35 years has radically changed the social structure and way of life in Orthodox communities. In the past, most men in this segment of the Jewish population worked for a living, and the women were constrained to a traditional role as housewives and mothers. However, the role of women has changed in recent years, and they have increasingly started to be gainfully employed and to support their family, while the men study full-time in religious seminaries (*Yeshivas*).

Religious studies have always been regarded as the noblest and the most prestigious activity for an Orthodox Jewish man. Intensive learning of the sacred texts starts at a very early age, usually when a boy is three years old, and continues into adolescence. Young women of rich and prominent families sought to marry a learned *yeshiva* student – the most desirable match for matrimony. In many communities, the brightest students were selected and designated as future religious leaders (Rabbis) and were financially supported either by their community or by their bride's family. Throughout the history predating the State of Israel, the majority of the men worked for a living, and only the most accomplished scholars continued their studies into adulthood, and usually ended up as rabbis of their community. The high value which is placed on education determined to a large extent the social standing of men. Women were excluded from this education, and were taught only the basic literacy skills to allow them to pray and to make simple calculations.

This social structure, which had been maintained for generations in Jewish communities in the diaspora continued more or less unchanged during the first two decades after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. However, the newly founded Jewish state agreed to exempt a selected group of “gifted” *yeshiva* students from mandatory military service, and to financially support them throughout their studies. The rationale behind this exemption was the intent to compensate for the destruction of many *yeshivas* during the holocaust of WWII. The number of exempt students has since gradually

increased, in conjunction with the rising power of religious parties. The leaders of the latter pushed for increasing the quota, and for exempting more and more of their constituency from the draft, in return for supporting the government. It should be noted that there is a compulsory conscription in Israel of both men and women, and men serve three years in the military, from age 18.

The great divide was in 1977, when as part of the coalition agreement of the right-wing government and the religious parties, the quota system was abolished, and all the men who studied in religious seminaries were exempt from military service, as long as they continued their studies, and as long as they were not gainfully employed. Consequently, a great incentive was created for remaining in the *yeshiva*, and for refraining from joining the work force. As a result, staying in the *yeshiva*, has become the norm, and voluntary unemployment has become a way of life for an ever increasing segment of the male population. Unlike students in academic institutions, *yeshiva* students receive a steady, albeit modest, stipend from the state, as well as financial benefits and exemptions from various taxes.

During the decades following its founding, the State of Israel developed a system of child support subsidies which was both generous and unique. Contrary to common sense which stipulates that the expense for each additional child in the family is smaller than that for the previous child, the subsidies were skewed towards large families. The system had undergone several changes, until in 2000 the support for a fourth child in the family was four times, and the subsidy for the fifth child was five times as much as for each of the first three children. Indeed some studies show that the marginal cost of an additional child of a large family in Israel often amounted to less than the government subsidy. Hence, under that system, it actually paid to have more children, and each additional child after the fifth child contributed to the financial welfare of the entire family.

Experts disagree about the effect of child subsidies on family size, but the situation in Israel seems to support the view that the financial incentive is an important determining factor in the decision to have more children. Whereas, in the past, the number of children per family in the Orthodox family was similar to that in the general population, it is not unusual now for an Orthodox Jewish woman to have ten or more children.

As a result of these political decisions – the exemption from military service of Orthodox men, and the unusual structure of child subsidies – the number of very large Orthodox families has grown considerably. However, the amount and distribution of child subsidies have since changed again, but in the opposite direction: the current trend seems to be towards a more even distribution of support to each child, regardless of the order in the family.

Due to these recent changes in the system, together with the rise in the cost of living, it has become increasingly difficult for Orthodox communities to meet the needs of their large families. On the one hand the economic situation pushed more and more families below the poverty line, and on the other hand the men are unable to work for fear of losing their special status as *yeshiva* students, and consequently their exemption from military service.

There are other impediments to men's employment. Even those who wish to join the work force, and are exempt from military service due to their age or large number of children, find it difficult to find work, due to lack of basic skills. Since the education of boys in the religious institutions is almost exclusively limited to religious studies, they reach adulthood with a severe lack of general education. The solution to this crisis is often found in the employment of Orthodox women.

Children and youth of the Orthodox community in Israel study in gender segregated schools and classes from a very early age. The boys study mainly religious studies, while the girls receive a much broader general education: They study mathematics, English, and some science. As a result, girls are much better prepared and more capable of employment. More and more women have joined the work force, and are now employed. Many found jobs in the growing high-tech industry as computer programmers, or as accountants, and some opened their own businesses.

The reality in the Orthodox community is that women work (taking frequent maternity leaves, which are fully paid by the state), while men study at *yeshivas* (though with highly varying amounts of diligence and devotion). Through a process of socialization, girls and women in the Orthodox community tend to regard this situation as ideal family life.

One would expect that the ability of women to support their family would enhance their status within the family and within their community. Moreover, it is also reasonable to expect that as these trends continue, fertility rates would drop. Sen (2000)¹ showed that there is a direct correlation between women's agency and reduced fertility rates. Indeed, an optimistic sign may be observed in a recent slight decline in fertility rates. Some attribute this decline to the gradually reduced and more evenly distributed child subsidies which recent governments in Israel, including the current one, have been implementing, in spite of large protests from the political representatives of the Orthodox community.

However, the situation in Israel is unique, and other trends in the Orthodox community concurrently influence the status of women and the relationships between the sexes.

Recent years have seen a process of radicalization within the Orthodox Jewish community. The rabbis are constantly dictating new, more stringent limitations, prohibitions, and decrees. These new regulations often pertain to the status of women and they include increasingly modest dress codes, severe segregation of the sexes in private and public places, and a stifling exclusion of women from the public sphere. Thus, there are segregated public places and means of transportation, such as buses where gender segregation is enforced (women board the bus from the rear and sit in the back). Women are excluded from the political process by being prevented from running for office, or from being elected in religious parties and localities. Women are prevented from singing in public, and exhibiting female images in public is prohibited. The rationales for these practices are modesty, and the religious

¹ Sen, A. (2000). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

requirement to avoid sexual stimulation in men. The result is that women are excluded from being seen or heard in public.

It is very possible that this form of fundamentalism is a backlash effect of the threat which is posed by the new economic role of women. It may be a reactionary attempt to disempower women and to neutralize their agency.

The social phenomena of the oppression of women and the recent economic trends in the Orthodox community are complex and dynamic. Economic empowerment and social changes such as the reduction in the number of children in the family are long term processes, which may take decades to manifest themselves in this community.

However, the status of Orthodox women in Israel challenges the accepted tenet that economic empowerment, education, employment opportunities, and financial independence, necessarily enhance the agency of women, and contribute to reduced fertility rates. The unique political situation in Israel and its economic ramifications, and the relative cultural and social seclusion of the Orthodox community, introduce additional variables which significantly affect the status of women in this society.

Destructive and myopic policies of the government, which have been motivated by short term political gains, have led to the establishment of institutions and enabled the creation of modes of life which disempower women and hamper the advancement of society as a whole.

Furthermore, the disempowerment is also intrinsic: religious and cultural attitudes, and social norms, are ingrained in the upbringing of women and girls from early childhood and serve as strong barriers against genuine empowerment.

The role of religion in the disempowerment of women cannot be overstated. The power of religious belief, and the incentive of men and their power institutions to control women, their reproduction, and their freedom, are strong enough to balance the potential empowerment and control which Orthodox Jewish women could have achieved otherwise through their newly gained status of principal providers.