Pergamon

Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 109–128, 2003

0277-5395/03/$–see front matter

doi 10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00043-8

GENDER POLITICS IN ISRAEL: THE CASE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR WOMEN DIRECTORS☆

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Synopsis — This article tells the story of how Israeli women succeeded in obtaining affirmative action to give them access to state-owned company boards. The apparent paradox of the inclusion of affirmative action in a law intended to eliminate "irrelevant" considerations in the appointment of directors and the irony that affirmative action was legislated for the most privileged minority—professional women—are explained in relation to the specificities of Israel's "incorporation regime": its republican-to-citizenship discourse that legitimated a hierarchy of entitlements among women on the basis of nationality and ethnicity and the transition to a liberal citizenship discourse with its emphasis on individual merit and equal opportunity. The article traces the political and historic context within which the struggle for affirmative action took place, focusing on the orchestration and strategy supplied by the emergent professional class of women, particularly feminist lawyers and members of women's organizations. Ultimately, the way the policy was framed and construed—as recognition of women's potential contributions to company boards—kept women locked in a gendered social order. © 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

This article tells the story of how Israeli women succeeded in getting affirmative action to give them access to state-owned company boards.[1] In 1993, the Israeli Knesset (parliament) passed a law intended to eliminate political patronage and assure the appointment of professionally qualified directors to boards of government-owned companies.[2] This law included an affirmative action stipulation to encourage the appointment of women directors. It was the first affirmative action legislation in Israel. The apparent paradox of the inclusion of gender in a law intended to eliminate "irrelevant" considerations in the appointment of directors and the irony that affirmative action was legislated for the most privileged minority—professional women—provide the springboards for analysis.

The article locates gender politics in the wider context of the social conditions of Israeli society (see Azmon & Izraeli, 1993; Herzog, 1999; Yishai, 1997). It argues that the apparent paradoxes associated with affirmative action need to be understood in relation to the specificities of Israel's "incorporation regime," namely, "the pattern of institutional practices and more or less explicit cultural norms that define the membership of individuals and/or groups in the society and differentially allocates entitlements, obligations and domination" (Shafir & Peled, 1998: 412):

> Historically, Israel's incorporation regime was constituted through a combination of three citizenship discourses. . .a collectivist republican discourse [where entitlements are] based on a "pioneering" civic virtue, an ethno-nationalist discourse, based on Jewish descent, and an individualist liberal discourse [associated with a market economy] (Shafir & Peled, 1998: 412).

The ethno-nationalist citizenship discourse discriminated between Jew and non-Jew; the republican

☆Hanna Herzog performed the final editing and proof-check of this paper.

†Dafna Izraeli died in February 2003.

The author thanks Nitza Berkovitch, Deborah Bernstein, Judith Lorber, Billy Melman, Uri Ram, Susan Sered, Michael Shalev, Ronen Shamir, and Neta Ziv for their helpful comments at various stages in the writing of this article. She expresses her gratitude to former M.K. Dedi Zucker for giving her access to the minutes of the Law, Constitution, and Justice Committee and to the Knesset archive librarian for her assistance in locating the documents.

discourse discriminated between Jews on the basis of ethnicity and gender (Shafir & Peled, 1998: 415). Gender discrimination stemmed from "the close linkage between civic and military virtue," the exclusion of women from military virtue despite their mandatory service (Shafir & Peled, 1998; see also Izraeli, 1997), and the republican emphasis on maternity as women's primary contribution to the collective (Berkovitch, 1997) factors that worked against women's equality. According to Shafir and Peled, around a (primarily all-male) core, comprised of those who actively participated in the Labor movement's colonizing and military activities, there formed a periphery of passive citizens who were entitled to only a smaller share of societal resources. It should be added, however, that women were also subject to different citizenship discourses and that the republican discourse legitimated a hierarchy of entitlements among women on the basis of nationality and ethnicity. It discriminated between Jewish women and non-Jewish women, between Ashkenazi women (Jewish women of European origin who were associated with Israel's state building male elite) and Mizrachi women (who originated from Moslem countries).

Researchers (e.g. Ezrahi, 1997; Shafir & Peled, 1998; Shalev, 1992) have pointed to the major transformation of Israeli society that began in the late 1960s and accelerated in the mid-1980s. During that period, Israel went from a collective, protectionist, and state-centered society to a much more individualist, open, neoliberal one. This development was both the cause and effect of an expanding economy and the massive entry of women into the labor market. Shafir and Peled (1998) analyzed the transformation in terms of a transition from a collective republican citizenship discourse, in which entitlements are based on contributions to the collective, to an individual liberal citizenship discourse.

The concept of a career, which in the 1960s carried a strong pejorative connotation of pursuing one's personal interest at the expense of the common good, had, by the 1980s, become a legitimate object of aspiration-even for women. A growing class of professional, mainly Ashkenazi, women began moving up organizational and occupational ladders seeking advancement in the public sphere. The transition in the mid-1980s from the republican to a more liberal discourse is reflected in the shift that took place in public policy, pushed by women's organizations, from an emphasis on protective policies for working mothers to policies that promoted equal opportunities for all women (Raday, 1996).

Connell (1994: 150) suggested that the historic shift from economic systems dominated by political patronage to those that promote professional expertise represents a transition from one form of hegemonic masculinity to another. Whereas the rationality discourse still privileges men, who are generally perceived to be more rational than women, it nonetheless opens new spaces for women's involvement. In Israel, the form of masculinity that prized the ability to mobilize constituencies to vote worked through patronage obligations and exclusionary social networks. Few women had influential political ties, and those who did were frequently not able to convert them into political resources (Herzog, 1999). The cultural ascendancy of the market thus opened a window of opportunity for the new class of professional women to convert their formal education into cultural capital.

In the United States, according to Jackson (1998), although economic processes did not directly lead to women's assimilation into high-status jobs, they set the stage for this outcome. Rational administration and the enhancement of organizational interests greatly diminished the interests and power that were rationally committed to women's exclusion. Meritocratic standards (bolstered by rationalization and egalitarianism) increasingly gave women ideological symbols to which they could attach their discontent with discrimination and unequal opportunity and weakened men's belief that discriminating against women was just.

My study shows that rationalization occurs in a political and historic context and that the pressure for gender equality is not an automatic result of these processes. Men's resistance to women's greater representation in positions of power, which intensifies competition for such desired positions, may persist and even be explained using the rhetoric of rationality. Gender equality needs to be orchestrated and strategized by interested individuals and groups, and the means and outcomes may be counter to the underlying rhetoric of rationalization.[3]

In the case of affirmative action for women directors of state-owned company boards in Israel, the orchestration and strategy were supplied by the emergent professional class of women, particularly feminist lawyers and members of women's organizations (Herzog, 1999; Izraeli, 1991; Raday, 1996). Employed in government service, as well as in civil rights and women's organizations, feminist lawyers were in positions where they could exert influence on the policy-making process. The growth of new feminist organizations, such as the Israel Women's Network, and the greater feminist consciousness of large established

women's organizations, such as *NAAMAT* (the women's Labor movement, the oldest and largest women organization in Israel), combined with the emergence of a new professional class of women, increased the political and social capital of some women and enabled them to promote their interests as a group and as individuals. These women were influenced by the ideas of American feminism and supported by international bodies like the United Nations through the Decade on Women and the treaty on the elimination of gender discrimination. Affirmative action for women directors was part of their agenda.

The growth of the civil rights movement and civil rights litigation within the new liberal discourse increased sensitivity to discrimination against women (Ziv, 1999). According to Ziv, whereas in the United States, justice for women followed the movement for racial justice, in Israel, women were the first major beneficiaries of this movement, followed later by other groups.[4] Until the mid-1980s, grievances over group disparities were channeled through political parties that represented defined constituencies.[5] Only from the mid-1980s on were claims for group equality transformed into civil rights language as women began to challenge group-based discrimination via political, grassroots, and legal means.

These developments provided the ideological and political context that was conducive to the introduction of affirmative action for privileged women. The strengthening of the liberal citizenship discourse, however, did not mark the demise of the republican perspective. As Shafir and Peled (1998: 416–417) pointed out, "under the legitimation guise of universal liberal citizenship, individuals and social groups continued to be treated by the state in accordance with their presumed contributions to the common group as defined by the Zionist project."

The next sections present the affirmative action law and its contradictions, followed by an overview of the growing pubic pressure to depoliticize company boards that was the major impetus for the use of legislation to change the way in which boards were constituted and provided an opportunity for women to insert their claims in the public debate. Against this background, the succeeding sections examine the history of women's representation on boards as a public issue around which interested women's organizations mobilized.

I argue that the demand for greater representation was reinforced in the context of the favorable political opportunity structure and a growing class of women professionals who were working for state agencies. The final form that the affirmative action legislation took and its passage in the Knesset, however, were, in large measure, the result of the efforts of male political actors who considered it in their interest to champion affirmative action for women. The actual implementation of the law required the intervention of the Supreme Court. Ultimately, the way the policy was framed and construed—as recognition of women's potential contributions to company boards—kept women locked in a gendered social order.

THE EVENT AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

On March 16, 1993, the Knesset passed an amendment to the State-owned Companies' Act of 1975 concerning appointments of directors to the boards of such companies. In 1991, there were approximately 750 directors in 160 state-owned companies, including such large firms as the Israel Aircraft Industries, the Israeli Military Industry (Ta'as), Bezek (the telephone company) and El-Al Israel Airlines, 5% of whom were women (Divrei HaKnesset, 1992a).[6] Ministers frequently used such appointments as political patronage (Aharoni, 1991). In 1990, some 65% of the directors of governmental companies were members of the central committees of the various political parties—the bodies that appoint the ministers (Comptroller General, 1990: 612). Those who were appointed often lacked the competence to monitor the work of the companies. They also lacked the independence necessary to protect the interests of the general public against the more narrow political considerations of the ministers. The amendment defined academic and other qualifications required for becoming a director and specified that persons with financial, political, or familial ties to ministers could not be appointed.

According to members of the Knesset (MKs) Dedi Zucker and Haim Oron, who sponsored the amendment (known as amendment 6), its purpose was

> to assure the existence of a proper (standardized) appointment procedure for directors that should be based only on relevant considerations and be related to advancing the welfare of the company and the suitability of the candidate to serve in this role, to secure adequate guarantees that the selection of candidates will be detached, as much as possible, from political tendencies or personal obligations. (Divrei HaKnesset, 1992b)

In other words, the 1993 amendment was intended to eliminate political patronage and ensure that only professionally qualified people would be appointed

directors. Of special interest to my study, however, is clause 18a of Amendment 6, known as the affirmative action clause, which states:

(a) In the makeup of the board of directors of a state-owned company, appropriate[7] expression will be given to the representation of both sexes.
(b) Until that time as the said appropriate representation is achieved, government ministers will appoint, to the extent feasible under the relevant conditions, directors from the sex which is not appropriately represented at that time on the company board.

Clause 18a is significant for two reasons: One, it was the first piece of affirmative action legislation ever enacted in Israel: before the amendment was passed, the concept of affirmative action as a basis for legal action was virtually nonexistent and was largely rejected as a basis of social policy for achieving equality for women (Raday, 1995; Yishai, 1997: 147). Two, it entails a number of conundrums that this article attempts to resolve.

The first is the apparent paradox of the inclusion of a consideration based on ascription into legislation aimed at institutionalizing a merit system and eliminating "irrelevant considerations" in the appointment of directors. The second is the paradox that affirmative action, which in the United States was introduced to assist the most discriminated—against minority—African Americans—was introduced in Israel to advance the most privileged minority, Ashkenazi (European or American born) women.[8] Those who met the criteria for becoming directors and who could benefit most from the law were professional women with managerial experience who held senior positions within organizational hierarchies, namely, Jewish, middle-class women of European or American origin. Furthermore, affirmative action excluded men from more disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, such as Arab men.[9] The third is the irony that the rational discourse within which affirmative action was embedded discouraged women, once appointed as directors, from speaking in the name of women. As will be shown, affirmative action was legitimated as necessary to overcome discrimination so that "deserving" women could gain access to the boards of state-owned companies. Under pressure to prove that they were deserving, the women directors generally sought to avoid being singled out as women or making gender salient in their interactions with other directors. The result was that although women were appointed by men because they were women, they were constrained from acting as women on behalf of other women.

THE ATTACK ON PATRONAGE

Israel, established in 1948 as a Jewish nationalist and socialist state, adopted a strong commitment to economic collectivism and a highly interventionist economic stance (Shalev, 1999: 123). In the early 1990s, the government employed approximately one-third of the labor force, and public-sector spending represented 60% of the gross national product (Bank of Israel, 1998: 274), among the highest in the world. Mapai (the acronym for the Workers' Party of Israel, the predecessor of the Labor Party), which was the dominant political party from the prestate period until 1977, established and sustained its hegemony by a system of patronage that infused all spheres of the polity. Mapai operated through its control of a complex system of institutions, including the Federation of Labor and the Health Insurance Fund, "whose role consisted of allocating resources in a way which would assure political support for the party" (Keren, 1993: 336). Political considerations in making appointments to public offices gained renewed importance following the elections of the right-of-center Likud Party in 1977 and again in 1981 and reached new heights during the unity government (1984–1988), which rotated between the Labor Party and the Likud Party. The administration and boards of governmental companies were valued sites for patronage. Although the struggle for power between the new managerial class that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s and the politicians led to greater emphasis on professional considerations in the selection of senior managers (Frenkel, 1998:1), this was not the case for board members. Just before the 1992 elections, the Likud government intensified its use of political appointments. Following the elections, ministers in the government submitted 160 applications for directorships in state-owned companies—20 times more than in an average month and 120 in the 2 weeks prior to the national elections (Zecharya, 1992).

In March 1985, the attorney general appointed a committee chaired by Meir Gabai, then Director General of the Ministry of Justice, to prepare criteria for the appointment of directors to state-owned companies (Comptroller General, 1989a: 20). Subsequently, the Comptroller General's (1989b, 1990, 1992) annual reports emphasized the malpractice involved in the selection of directors for state-owned companies and the need for the Knesset to approve the new regulations. These criticisms were made during the period of mounting public protest against the ineffectual operation of the governance function of companies belonging to the Histadrut—the Gen-

eral Federation of Labor—as well as of the banks. The growing deficit of Koor, the Histadrut's flagship conglomerate, with the consequent loss of some 20,000 jobs, and the collapse of the bank shares in 1983,[10] followed by the crisis in the kibbutz industries, highlighted the need for more effective and responsible governance (Shalev, 1999). The privatization (in 1991) of major conglomerates, such as the Histadrut-owned Koor Industries and government-owned Israel Chemicals, and the intention to privatize additional companies increased the importance of improving their governance function (Talmud & Izraeli, 1999).

Despite public criticism, however, each consecutive government resisted attempts to curtail its use of board appointments for patronage—a practice that ensured its control over company policies. Legislative initiatives to depoliticize and rationalize appointments of directors that were brought to the 11th (1984–1988) and 12th (1988–1992) Knessets were opposed by the government, especially the minister of finance, and died in committee. Finally, in November 1992, after the Labor Party returned to office, the Knesset passed the preliminary reading of an amendment to the State-owned Companies' Act, building on a law passed in the previous Knesset that depoliticized the top four management ranks of the state-owned companies. The new amendment specified the qualifications required of a director and the relationships to ministers that would disqualify a person from being appointed a director.

Of special relevance to this article is that the proposed amendment made *no* reference either to gender or to affirmative action. The following sections explore how affirmative action for women was incorporated into the law.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

For decades Israelis-women and men alike-believed that Israeli women enjoyed equality with men, a belief bolstered by women's compulsory military service and the powerful image of Prime Minister Golda Meir (Izraeli, 1994; Swirski & Safir, 1991).[11] However, Golda Meir not withstanding, women as a group never had significant political clout in Israel.[12] As Yishai (1997: 55) concluded, "women are on the margins of politics and they lack the resources to determine the course of events." Traditionally, as in other parts of the world (Katzenstein, 1987), they have had more influence in the parties of the Left than in others, and the great majority of women members of the Knesset came from the Labor Party and its splinter parties.[13] The tacit understanding was, however, that women's special needs would be dealt with by women's organizations, most of which were associated with political parties. One of the latent functions of these organizations was to free the "malestream" from having to deal with women's issues (Izraeli, 1991), which were not considered sufficiently important to be part of the national agenda (Herzog, 1996).

In the first four decades of statehood, the few women leaders in the ruling Labor Party were divided by their loyalties to the various competing factions within the party (Azmon & Izraeli, 1993). The electoral system, at least until a system of primaries was introduced in 1989, made women dependent on powerful men in the Central Committees of the parties who drew up the party lists at election time and virtually determined who would become members of the Knesset. Nonetheless, the principle of women's right to representation on publicly constituted bodies, like the myth of their equality (written into the Israeli Declaration of Independence), was part of the ideological repertoire of Israeli politics (see Berkovitch, 1999; Izraeli, 1997). In the Labor Party, this right was translated into an informal policy of quotas for women. The quota system was formalized at the 1971 Labor Party convention, which, under pressure from the women's caucus and with the support of the then-prime minister, Golda Meir, granted a 20% quota for women in all the institutions of the party, including the electoral list for the Knesset. However, women never achieved 20% representation in any of the party organs, including the party lists for the Knesset (Herzog, 1996). The quota system not only put a ceiling on the number of women elected or appointed; it also backfired. People often preferred not to "waste" their votes on women, who would be appointed regardless of the number of votes they received, and thus, ironically, the quota system resulted in women getting fewer votes than they might have otherwise received (Azmon & Izraeli, 1993). The quota system mainly protected the positions of a handful of influential women, loyal members of the Labor Party coalition, who made it into the Knesset or were rewarded with other positions, including occasional appointments to the boards of state-owned companies.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AS RHETORIC FOR SOCIAL POLICY

Governments often establish public commissions in response to pressures that are external to the political system, to quiet public discontent or to take controversial issues off the public agenda. Nonetheless,

their constitutions often provide opportunities for opposition and oppressed groups to mobilize around putative common interests, with outcomes that are subversive of the governments' intentions.

Between 1976 and 1993, the issue of women's representation in public life was discussed by three government-established bodies whose recommendations included increasing women's representation on boards of state-owned companies. Without exception, no mechanism was established for its implementation. These committees, however, provided a forum in which women could meet; formulate their common interests; gain access to information not otherwise available to them; strengthen and extend feminist networks; have their feminist consciousness heightened; and formulate policy proposals, which even if not implemented, entered the political arena as ideas that could be mobilized at a later time. Once ideas enter public space, they may remain dormant until they are activated by interested parties for some political advantage. This was the case with the demand for women's representation on boards of governmental companies.

The issue of women's participation on boards was first aired publicly by the *Report of the Prime Minister's Commission on the Status of Women*, known as the Namir Commission, established in response to the conditions set by the UN Decade on Women (1975–1985). Among the recommendations of the Subcommittee for Women's Representation and Involvement in Public and Political Life (Namir Commission, 1978: 320) was that "the government should initiate the appointment of women to such bodies as boards of state-owned companies, public councils and committees and investigative committees." The subcommittee apparently did not attribute great importance to the issue of women's representation on boards, and no data were provided. The one-sentence reference to it may be contrasted to the detailed manner in which the subcommittee dealt with such issues as women's underrepresentation in the Foreign Service, in political parties, and at the higher echelons of the civil service.[14]

The recommendation that the government should appoint women to boards disappeared from public view until April 1985, when it reemerged as a governmental decision. This decision, among other things, called for the appointment of advisers on the status of women in each ministry and for increasing the representation of women in senior positions in the civil service, on government tender committees [which select candidates for senior positions in the civil service] as well as on boards of state-owned companies (Israel Women's Network (IWN, 1987). The decision was the achievement of the then-adviser to the prime minister on the status of women, a position established in 1980, one of the few recommendations of the Namir Commission that was actually implemented. The position carried little authority and was endowed with minimal resources, but the person in the position, Nitza Shapiro Libai, enjoyed close ties with influential politicians, especially in the Labor Party, including the then-prime minister, Shimon Peres. After months of lobbying and "help from my friends" (as she put it), Shapiro Libai succeeded in getting the issue of the status of women in governmental service onto the agenda of the weekly governmental meeting at which she presented her proposal for increasing women's representation. Shapira Libai explained:

> I drafted the proposal; Peres signed and brought it to the cabinet for approval. At the cabinet meeting, I lectured at length—on international law, human rights, and discrimination. I think they did not really understand the implications of my proposal. The Liberal Party [then part of the coalition] argued: What if there are no suitable women for senior positions? I brought names of women—the whole thing passed by the skin of my teeth (Personal Communication, 1995).

The official statement to the press legitimated the government's decision on three grounds. First, it was a step toward the implementation of recommendations made by the Namir Commission. Framing it as a decision whose principle had already been accepted by the government increased its legitimacy. Second, it was based on the principle of social justice and equality of opportunity. The statement noted that women constituted 51% of those employed in governmental service but only approximately 15% of those in senior positions and only 2% of those on the boards of directors on state-owned companies. Statistics like 2% or 5% women became a trope for the injustice of the situation and, by implication, the need to remedy it. Third, it stated that given their considerable human capital, "women had an important potential contribution to make to service in the governmental sector that was not yet realized." This reference to women's human capital—their educational and professional accomplishments—was a new theme in the rhetoric justifying the demand for women's increased representation. It resonated with the emerging emphasis on the need for greater rationality in public bureaucracies and a greater emphasis on merit and qualifications as bases for promotion. Following the government's decision, volunteer

women advisers on the status of women were appointed in each ministry, but the proportion of women directors on state-owned company boards did not change.

Neither the recommendation of the Prime Minister's Commission on the Status of Women nor the 1985 governmental decision used the term *affirmative action.* The term first appeared in the report of the Koberski Commission, appointed in 1986, by the prime minister and minister of finance "to examine government service and bodies supported by the government, with the purpose of improving the quality of the services provided by the state and promoting the aims of the state" (Koberski Commission, 1989:3): One of the commission's seven subcommittees was designated to deal with the status of two "special populations"—women and minorities—the latter being a euphemism for Israeli Arabs. Women constituted approximately 50% of those employed in governmental service, Arabs less than 5%, and Arab women even fewer. Some of the Jewish women who were selected to be on the committee[15] objected to the linkage on the grounds that women were not a minority; consequently, in September 1987, separate subcommittees were appointed to deal with each population.[16]

One consequence of a conceptual scheme that defines people as either women or minorities is that it does not define a place for those who are both. Such people tend to be overlooked and suffer from "double invisibility" (Hooks, 1981). As Spelman (1988: 14) pointed out, "gender can be treated in a way that obscures the race and class of privileged women. . .and simultaneously makes it hard to conceive of women who are not of that particular class and race as women." The claim for greater representation for women masked the fact that the beneficiaries would most likely be middle-class Jewish women of Western or European American origin—not Jewish woman of Middle Eastern and North African origin or Arab women.

In contrast to the Subcommittee on the Status of Minorities, which explicitly objected to the use of affirmative action, the Subcommittee on the Status of Women in Government Service claimed that affirmative action was needed to compensate women for discrimination based on stereotypes that resulted in women's unequal starting point in the competition for advantage. It called for the recognition of women as a population requiring special treatment with regard to training and promotion "comparable to [privileges given to] released soldiers, new immigrants and senior military officers" and reaffirmed the governmental decision of 1985 to include women on the boards of state-owned companies (Koberski Commission, 1989: 270). The rhetoric of the committee, within the tradition of the republican citizenship discourse (Shafir & Peled, 1998), sanctified (Jewish) women by linking them with other (Jewish) groups associated with the realization of Zionist ideals.[17]

THE PUSH FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION LEGISLATION

Women's politics in Israel have been dominated by what Katzenstein (1990) called "the politics of associationalism," rather than by street politics. The most powerful associations operated in male-dominated institutions, such as the military, political parties, and the Histadrut, where men controlled the resources and the channels to leadership. The establishment in 1984 of the Israel Women's Network (IWN) a multi-issue feminist lobby, "revolutionized the arena of women's associations" (Yishai, 1997: 71). IWN, under the charismatic leadership of Alice Shalvi, was the first women's organization to focus on women's use of power as a major goal. Most of the leading members of IWN were high-profile feminist academics with links to the political establishment, predominantly (but not exclusively) of the Left. Furthermore, supported by funds from the U.S.-based New Israel Fund, IWN enjoyed greater autonomy than the traditional large women's organizations that were financially dependent on specific political parties or governmental funds. It was able to adopt its own agenda and to form alliances with any political party that was willing to advance its feminist agenda.

IWN created a political forum that linked women politicians and a pool of women who were in a position to enter electoral politics across party lines. As Yishai (1997: 71) noted: "Its first move was to pressure the prospective leaders of the National Unity Government [1984–88] to include women in the cabinet and to precipitate the implementation of the report issued by the Commission on the Status of Women." Four women who were elected for the first time to the Knesset in 1992 had been members of the IWN political forum, and almost all the others had participated in IWN activities, including Yael Dayan, chairperson of the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women.

The passage, in 1987, of an amendment to the Companies Act (1983) that required the boards of publicly traded corporations to include two directors who would serve as representatives of the public at large catapulted IWN into action. The amendment

was an opportunity to get more women into positions of power.

In cooperation with other women's organizations, whose members were potential candidates in the expanding market for directorships, IWN undertook a three-pronged strategy to promote women to boards. The first strategy was to create a reservoir of women candidates to counter the common argument regarding the lack of competent women who were willing to become directors.[18] IWN, in cooperation with the Association of Women Executives and the women's caucus of the Labor Party, collected the names of noted professional women, informed them of the new opportunities to become directors, and urged them to apply for such positions and submit résumés to IWN for distribution.[19] The résumés were later computerized by the Women's Senior Management Forum (attached to the Israel Management Center), in cooperation with other women's organizations, to form a national data bank of hundreds of women who were prepared to serve as directors.

The second strategy was directed toward influencing important gatekeepers of board positions. IWN conducted a selectively targeted letter campaign directed to ministers, state-owned companies, and large public institutions, such as the big banks, which were taken over by the government after the 1983 crisis and were appointing new directors in the late 1980s. The letters pointed to the underrepresentation of women on the boards and emphasized that women's participation in management would increase "professional talent which could serve the state economy well" (IWN archives, 1985–1995).[20] Both strategies proved ineffective for getting more women appointed to boards. The letters either went unanswered or were answered with polite but evasive messages. IWN had no clout to compel companies to address this issue seriously.

Following the 1988 elections, which returned the right-wing Likud Party to office, IWN decided to pursue the third strategy—the legislative route. IWN's legal center, established in 1988, drafted legislative proposals and lobbied for their acceptance. On the affirmative action issue, it found an ally in Mapam (Left, Marxist oriented, Zionist party). Now in the opposition, Mapam and Ratz—the civil rights party that was founded and headed by a woman, Shulamit Aloni, left the Labor coalition and acted as autonomous parties.

Apart from Mapam's ideological commitment to social equality, it had a political interest in championing women's rights and a close working relationship with IWN. The party received most of its electoral support from Jews of Western origin, particularly educated women who sympathized with the liberal goals of the dominant part of the Israeli feminist movement. The women's caucus in Mapam was well organized and worked strategically to "secure representation" on all party organs (Zvi, 1999: 32). In 1989, Mapam MK Yair Zaban submitted a legislative proposal, drafted by the IWN lawyers, requiring that one of the two directors representing the public at large in publicly traded corporations should be a woman. In 1991, he submitted a second proposal regarding boards of governmental companies: "A director of one sex shall not be appointed to the board of a state-owned company unless, at the time of appointment, there is at least one director of the other sex." (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993a: 2877). The first proposal, related to the private sector, was killed in committee. It reemerged and was passed almost a decade later (1998). The second, relating to state-owned companies, was brought to the Knesset for a preliminary hearing on January 22, 1992, where it passed (13 in favor, none against) but was killed in the Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee (hereafter called the Law Committee).

The next section traces the trajectory of the affirmative action proposal as it moved through the legislative arena, emphasizing the hurdles that had to be overcome and the tactics used to circumvent them. The section following it focuses on the debate over affirmative action and highlights the politics of gender identity.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION ENTERS THE LEGISLATIVE ARENA

The 13th Knesset (1992–1996) marked a propitious time for legislation promoting gender equality. Following the 1992 elections, the newly formed left-of-center party Meretz—which incorporated the Mapam and Ratz parties—formed part of the Labor coalition. In 1992, Meretz had the largest proportion of women in party institutions of any political party (Yishai, 1997: 48). The adoption of the primary system for selecting party candidates (in 1989) had transferred power from the central committee to registered party members, of whom women were a significant minority. The primary system made all politicians less dependent on the Central Committee and gave individual men and women who were skilled in negotiating electoral bargains the opportunity to mobilize political support for their candidacy for office. Promoting legislation on behalf of women (provided it did not entail budgetary expenses) became politically correct.

Newly elected Labor Party MK Avraham Burg resubmitted the legislation (in July 1992) that MK Zaban had proposed to the previous Knesset. At the preliminary hearing, (January 27, 1993), Minister of Justice David Libai, in the name of the government, approved the principle of affirmative action, but had certain reservations.

The Government had decided to reject the proposal because its demand for only one woman was too minimal.

The purpose of such legislation is to increase the representation of women, not to set such a low ceiling on it. . .The accepted approach in the world today with regard to equality between the sexes is that it is not enough to grant equal opportunity; it is necessary to be proactive in order to achieve equality of results (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993a: 2877). The Knesset voted (12 to 1) to send the bill to the Law Committee, where legal advisers played an instrumental role in shaping the proposed legislation.

Many of the women lawyers and legal advisers in the various government ministries and departments were uncomfortable about the idea of affirmative action for women. They did not want to be identified on the basis of gender or to be stigmatized as "disadvantaged" Their successful careers were proof that capable women did not need to be given preference. There was, however, a small number of feminists among the lawyers, such as American-educated Carmel Shalev, a legislation officer at the Ministry of Justice, who favored affirmative action. Shalev assisted Davida Lachman-Messer, legal adviser to the Ministry of Justice, in drafting the affirmative action law, contributing the "appropriate representation clause." She also influenced Lachman-Messer's perception of the gender issue.[21] As Lachman-Messer "confessed" to the Law Committee (Protocol, 1993a: 33):

> When your proposal first came to the minister of justice [in the previous Knesset], I also then dealt with it and objected to it. . .and I even saw in it an affront to my status as a woman. Since then, [much] water has flown in the river, and I came to know that the enlightened and liberal positions we have adopted for many years, of not interfering so that the relevant considerations should be the ones to determine [outcomes], are all nice in theory but are a far cry from practice. As long as men are the ones who appoint, men will appoint men. The probability that men who appoint directors to state-owned companies will appoint women is the exception [not the rule].

The new formulation of the law was significant in the process of "discursive politics" and "meaning making" (Katzenstein, 1995:35). Gender-neutral wording and the phrase "appropriate representation" were adopted. Substituting the term "the sex that is not represented" for the term "woman" made women's difference less salient, veiled what some claimed to be "counterdiscrimination," and embellished the law with an aura of fairness. Everyone knew, however, that the beneficiaries would be women, and MKs who wished to discredit affirmative action referred to it as "the women's clause" (see Divrei HaKnesset, 1993b).

The term "appropriate" (*holem*) has a positive emotive meaning and allows for multiple definitions. It also arouses less resistance than either "equality," which poses a threat to existing power arrangements, or a specified proportion that one group may consider adequate but another group may view as too high or too low. Since the term "appropriate" was not defined, the way was opened for future judicial interpretation.

The Law Committee, constituted of members from different political parties but chaired by a member of the Meretz Party, part of the Labor coalition, was sharply divided on the issue of women's representation. The division was largely along party lines. Committee members from the right-wing Likud party and the religious parties reluctantly supported the proposal to include the declaratory half of clause 18a(a), expressing the principle of achieving appropriate representation for both sexes (provided that women were equally qualified), but opposed affirmative action. Most of the members of the Labor coalition, including the chairperson MK Dedi Zucker, wanted to include the affirmative action clause 18a(b), instructing ministers to give preference to women.[22]

With many reservations by MKs from all camps, the law passed the first reading (13 in favor and none opposed) and was returned to committee for reworking.

The debate in the committee continued throughout the preparations for the second and third readings. Once again, the majority voted to limit the proposal to the declaratory first half of clause 18a(a) (Protocol, 1993b: 18). Outvoted in the committee, the two MKs from Meretz (Zucker and Oron) used their legislative prerogative and presented the affirmative action clause to the Knesset as a reservation to the proposed amendment. The affirmative action reservation passed in the Knesset 31 to 3 with 1 abstention and was incorporated in the general amendment to the State-Owned Companies' Act.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE DEBATE OVER AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

The debate over affirmative may be considered an example of what Katzenstein (1995: 35) called "discursive politics" or "the politics of meaning making." It is discursive, "in that it seeks to reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and the state" (p. 35). I use the term to refer to the way competing interest groups attempt to impose their interpretation and definition of the meaning of gender identity in the state arena. Katzenstein (1990: 37) noted that as occurs with race and class, institutions give rise to "distinct and multiple understandings" of gender. The following analysis highlights these understandings in relation to affirmative action for women. In the preamble to the legislation proposed by MK Zaban and later by MK Burg, the rationale for the law was as follows:

> The board of directors has considerable authority and ability to influence the policy of a company, as well the advancement of women in it. . .There is much room for the advancement of women to the board of these companies, companies whose special status as guardians over public assets and [which have] responsibility for achieving national goals, makes the supervision over them a matter that cannot tolerate any form of discrimination, including discrimination against women. . .There is no justification for this low representation of only 5% women, especially if we take into account the recent gains in women's integration in the various spheres [of public life]—economic legal and administrative. The purpose of this law is to achieve the participation of as many women as possible on the boards of state-owned companies.

The theme of the lack of justification for women's minute representation, considering their contributions to the running of the state apparatus, occurred many times during the Knesset debate.

A second theme emphasized by the male proponents of the law underlined that the process would be gradual; the law was pragmatic, not dogmatic, and it provided escape clauses so as not to undermine the economic interest. It was confined to the government-owned sector and to women of merit. Because state-owned companies are a public good, the government must ensure that they do not discriminate. In contrast to privately owned firms or firms owned by stockholders which were acknowledged as sites where the government has no right to intervene (stated explicitly by MK Burg; see Divrei HaKnesset, 1993b: 3494), even though they receive many and diverse benefits from the government.

The third theme was that given the large number of relevantly qualified women and their potential contributions, their exclusion from boards was not just. Affirmative action was required not because women as a group are excluded but because of the connection between women and merit. In case of a conflict between the apparent interests of the company and affirmative action, however, it was acknowledged that the former would prevail.

No one questioned the legitimacy of the use of the category "women" or whether affirmative action would apply to all women with the suitable qualifications—irrespective of ethnic or religious origin. All paid lip service to the norm of gender equality and acknowledged the existing talent pool of women who were qualified to serve as directors.

The vocal supporters of affirmative action came from the Labor camp. Their major argument was that gender discrimination was so widespread and the bias in favor of men so deeply rooted that nothing short of affirmative action would result in women being appointed directors. As Zaban (Divrei HaKnesset, 1992a) explained to the Knesset:

> We are familiar with legislators and politicians, generally men, not all but most; [they] are willing to grant women equality with regard to various welfare/social rights, they are much less willing to share the political pie of ruling and being close to the levers of political power.

Also, in the words of MK Naomi Chazan (Meretz): "The problem is not qualifications; it is the lack of sensitivity and structural barriers" (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993b: 3488).

The women in the Knesset supported affirmative action across party lines. The five women MKs, from both the right- and left-wing parties, who participated in the debate at the first reading welcomed the proposal, complimented the MKs who proposed it, but also demanded that the law specify quotas.[23] MK Anat Maor (Meretz) insisted that Israel was 10 years behind Europe in this matter and what was needed was a leap forward, not incrementalism. She thought 40% was fair but would compromise on one-third as an interim measure. MK Naomi Blumenthal (Likud) agreed with Maor and Nomi Chazan (Meretz) and thought, given women's qualifications, that a minimum of 40% women was just. Unlike the men who viewed state-owned companies as a restricted site, the women contended that affirmative action should be

extended to many other fields. However, following the first reading, it appears that the women backed down from their insistence on quotas—none submitted a reservation to that effect.

Opposition to the proposed legislation was embedded in two different and contradictory discourses: the rationality discourse and the fairness discourse. Sometimes, MKs moved from one to the other to bolster their position. The rationality discourse was used primarily by Likud members, led by MK Dan Meridor, a liberal–democrat and minister of justice in the previous government. Meridor insisted that affirmative action was contrary to the intention of the amendment, which was to assure that only those most suited for the position be appointed directors. To Meridor, affirmative action meant, in fact, selecting a person who was less qualified because she was a woman. MK Yitzchak Levy, of the National Religious Party (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993b: 3495) dramatized the damage that would be done if preference were given to a woman who presumably was less qualified: "Let us take [the example] of a hospital department, and let us assume we need five doctors. Would it ever cross anyone's mind that someone should say: Of the five doctors there have to be two women? Absolutely not." For Levy, affirmative action was unthinkable.

Meridor insisted that for truly competent women, there was no need for affirmative action—they would be selected on their own merits. The large number of women in senior positions in the Ministry of Justice was proof of this. Women had not been appointed as directors because directors were appointed from among the Central Committees of political parties, which had no women members. With this practice eliminated by the new law, nothing would stand in the way of women's appointment.

The second argument against the affirmative action law was that it made women the exclusive beneficiaries, when they are neither the only nor the most discriminated against group. The other groups or sectors were implicitly assumed to be comprised of men, and women were presumed not to be included. This argument was made by the Druze MK Asad Asad in the name of "minorities" but more fervently by Likud members to discredit the law. Meridor expressed this point of view most eloquently (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993b: 4056):

> If we wish to correct (the law) I truly think that MK Asad Asad and other members have a claim that cannot be disregarded. There are other groups that are not fairly represented among directors. He [Asad Asad] mentioned minorities. I think he is right. I can say that also residents of development towns are not represented in numbers they deserve. I think that is also correct. I think population groups by ethnic group, country of origin, may not be represented fairly. Are women the most underprivileged? Between minorities and women, can someone tell me which is more underprivileged. Forgive the question.Therefore, I suggest that we don't get into that method that creates pigeonholes. We can say—we must have someone from the Galilee. Is it possible not to have someone from the Galilee? and of course someone from the Negev. . .And of course minorities, maybe Druze and Czherkesis should get separate representation. . .In the end there won't be an appointment based on relevant considerations. We will end up achieving the very opposite goal that we sought in this law—namely, to make an appointment on relevant considerations.

This argument defined women as one of many groups underrepresented among directors and, in principle, no different from them. It is worth noting that MK Asad Asad (Likud) framed his request to include minorities as beneficiaries of affirmative action within the accepted discourse of desired Arab–Jewish relations in Israel. He made no mention of fairness or justice, but hinted at strengthening loyalty and enhancing peaceful coexistence.

> You say here that we have to take into consideration also the women in appointing directors. Eighteen percent of the population of Israel are minorities. . .There are few minorities among the directors, one or two. The qualifications you require are found among many of the minorities who can be good directors and *they will serve the state. Maybe this [more Arab directors on boards] will bring about more inclusion (shiluv) and integration in the state* [emphasis added] (ibid).

The main issue for the other excluded interest groups, represented by MK Shlomo Buchbut, spokesperson for the lower-class Mizrachi neighborhoods, and MK Avraham Ravitz, of the ultraorthodox Degel Hatorah Party, was not the exclusivity of affirmative action for women, but the requirement that directors have academic degrees—a requirement that would exclude the vast majority of their respective constituencies. Few from the lower classes get into the universities and the ultraorthodox do not permit their followers to attend them. Each challenged the legitimacy of the exclusivity of the academic requirement,

arguing that grassroots leadership (MK Buchbut) or a religious seminary (MK Ravitz) provides alternative but equivalent sources of relevant knowledge and experience.[24] Other Knesset members objected to what they considered to be an attempt to reduce the level of qualifications.

The supporters of affirmative action argued that the category woman is different from all other distinctions because women constitute the majority of the population. For example, MK Limor Livnat (Likud) was indignant at the failure to note the difference.

> How can you make such a comparison? Half the population are women. Is that like any other sectors, as important as they may be? Is that the same thing? How can you make such a comparison. Half the population is "disqualified" [from becoming directors]. (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993b: 3503)

MK Haim Oron echoed this argument (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993c: 4063): "We are speaking about half the population. It includes all the points of view, approaches, ethnic groups, all classes, all levels of education. It is in fact a picture of the whole society." When MK Shalom Yahalom (national religious party) remarked sarcastically from the Knesset floor (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993b: 4064) "Between us, you know that with the criteria we have here, no Druze or Arab woman will be accepted." MK Oron insisted that he personally knew 35 qualified Arab women who could double the current number of women directors.

The outcome was finally decided by the interests of the more powerful coalition in the Knesset, supported by other sectors, such as minorities, whose constituencies ultimately stood to benefit from the introduction of an affirmative action policy.

PUTTING THE LAW INTO PRACTICE

Once passed, the affirmative action clause was not put into practice. Governmental ministers continued to appoint men to boards that had no women members. The power to appoint directors is an important political prerogative with material consequences, which ministers would not willingly surrender. The phrase "to the extent feasible under the relevant conditions" provided an escape clause that ministers used to continue to appoint men. Furthermore, ministers were not constrained by the committee monitoring the implementation of the law because monitoring the representation of women on boards was not included in its mandate. The committee chair, retired judge Mordechai Ben-Dror, advised ministers of the need to use affirmative action, but lacked the authority to disqualify the appointment of a male candidate to a board that had no women members.

Additional pressure on ministers was generated when, in May 1993, 2 months after the affirmative action amendment passed, MK Minister Shimon Shetreet, chair of the Governmental Ministerial Committee for Coordination and Administration, established the Commission for the Advancement and Integration of Women in Government Service. The commission's mandate was to implement the recommendations of the Koberski Commission (1989) with regard to women in government service. In other words, it was conceived as an action commission that would bring about change. In fact, the new commission had no budget, except to cover the costs of its meetings, and was essentially window dressing for Shetreet.

Headed by a prominent law professor, Ruth Ben-Israel, and comprised of some 40 prominent women, including members of women's organizations, civil servants in administrative roles, and a few men, all volunteers, the commission created an informal network that linked the women members of the commission with feminists in the civil service and various voluntary women's organizations. The public stature of the chairperson and the governmental sponsorship was instrumental in the commission's getting access to information needed to take action, such as the gender makeup of company boards, the dates when current directors complete their terms, and the openings available to new directors. Such information was not available to the public.

The work of the commission was done in four subcommittees, two of which never got off the ground. The agenda of the subcommittee for the Promotion and Integration of Women in Management and Board Positions in the Government Sector, of which I was the chair, was getting ministers to appoint women directors as a top priority. The subcommittee prepared the first detailed report on the distribution of women among the state-owned company boards, documenting ministers' failure to appoint women in accordance with the law. It conducted a letter-writing campaign to ministers, reminding them of their obligation to appoint women to vacating board positions, and forwarded names and biographies of potential women candidates to gatekeepers in the system. The efforts made no significant impact, and ministers continued to appoint men until the IWN appealed to the Supreme Court.

WOMEN GO TO THE SUPREME COURT

In December 1993, the cabinet approved the appointments, sponsored by the minister of transport, of a male director to the Ports and Railways Authority board and of the minister of industry and commerce of two male directors to the Oil Refineries. Both boards had no women directors. In January 1994, IWN filed two petitions in the Supreme Court demanding that the government and the relevant ministers explain why they did not appoint women directors and offering a report by the Ben-Israel Commission documenting the ministers' failure to appoint women in accordance with the law. The reports of the subcommittee for the Promotion and Integration of Women in Management and Board Positions in the Government Sector provided supporting evidence (IWN archives, 1985–1995). On November 1, 1994, the Supreme Court instructed the relevant ministers to reopen the appointment procedure and follow the requirements of the law by making a more serious attempt to find suitable women candidates (High Court of Justice, 1994).[25]

The judgment confirmed the legality of affirmative action and provided the moral justification for its use (Raday, 1995).[26] It also sent a message to ministers that they could no longer ignore the law as they had done previously. The Supreme Court warned against using the qualifying clause "to the extent feasible under the circumstances" in bad faith and instructed the ministers to use the clause sparingly. What the Supreme Court would accept as "appropriate," were the case to arise, would depend on the requirements of the position and the availability of suitable women (High Court of Justice, 1994: 527–8) To date (January, 2003), the meaning of the term "appropriate" has not been tested in court.

The strong position taken by the Supreme Court came as a surprise to most people I interviewed. For example, the lawyer Davida Lachman-Messer, who was instrumental in drafting the affirmative action clause, told me: "They exaggerated"! That is, she believed that in annulling the appointments, rather than merely warning the ministers to appoint women in the future, the Supreme Court had taken a more aggressive stand than was called for.

The strong position taken by the Court had an almost immediate impact on appointments to the boards of state-owned companies. The Ben-Dror committee took a more vigilant stand and rejected appointments of men to boards that had no women members. Ministerial advisers approached women who were connected to the respective ministers or whom they knew to be strategically located to recommend other women as candidates for board appointments or received names from the adviser on the status of women. More women than before initiated contact with ministers, either directly or through "friends" or "friends of friends," to request appointments. A study of directors of governmental companies (Markovitch, 1998) found that those who were appointed after the law was passed were more likely than those who were appointed before its passage to say that they had initiated the contact. Once the appointment of women had become a real possibility, more women came to see themselves as potential candidates. For example, in response to a reporter's questioning a newly appointed woman director as to why she had not thought of becoming a director before the judgment, the director replied: "It was beyond my dreams as a woman; I am not one who does not put up a fight, but the board of directors was always outside the domain. For me, it was like thinking of [participating] in a beauty contest" (quoted in Lori, 1995: 22). The Supreme Court judgment had made it possible to imagine what had previous been unimaginable.

THE IMPACT OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION LEGISLATION

How successful was affirmative action as a strategy for women's representation in positions of influence? If we judge by the increase in the proportion of women directors on the boards of state-owned companies, then its success was considerable. Between 1993 and 1998, the proportion of directors who were women increased from approximately 7% to 40%, and the proportion of companies with no women directors declined from 69% in 1993 to 21.5% in 1997 (Comptroller General, 1998; Izraeli & Hillel, 2000). Of the companies in which there had been at least one woman director in 1993, the number of women directors had increased in 64%, had remained the same in 28%, and had decreased in 2.5% by 1997.

Board membership provided a few hundred women with the opportunity to gain experience in these high-status positions. It granted them access to strategic information and resource-rich social networks and increased the likelihood of their appointment to additional boards.[27] Ministers continued to make political appointments to boards (a practice criticized by the Comptroller General (1998: 39), but these now included women.

If we judge the affirmative action policy by the extent to which it provided women's interests a voice on the boards of directors, then the project could be

considered a failure. From my review of feature press articles on the topic and interviews with women directors, it appears that the success of affirmative action is in women's appointment, their ability to understand and contribute to the business of the board (at least not less so than men), and their acceptance by the other men directors. In no case did I find a reference to women representing the interests of women in the respective organization in which she was a director. No journalist ever raised the question. In an in-depth study of directors of state-owned companies, Markovitch (1998) reported that with only one exception, women insisted that their being women was not relevant in the boardroom. The only difference they perceived between themselves and their male colleagues was that they believed that they came better prepared to board meetings and were less likely to speak up when they were not well informed (see Huse, 1998, on Scandinavia). When asked by the interviewer whether they ever raised issues of specific relevance to women, they said that women's issues were not relevant to the board's agenda.

There were powerful structural and cultural constraints working against women directors who championed the cause of women in their respective firms. The women did not perceive themselves as appointed either to represent women's interests or because they were assumed to have a special women's perspective, but because of their *similarity* to men. Affirmative action was legitimated primarily within the terms of the new rationality discourse by which women's human capital (their professional qualifications) merited their appointment, denied them by discrimination. For example, in an interview with me conducted shortly after the law was passed, Lachman-Messer justified the clause in terms of the goals of the legislation. Rather than introduce an irrelevant consideration, she told me, the appointment of women directors would be proof that patronage had been eliminated and that ministers were paying more attention to talent than to politics.

> Women are not special or different from men except that they are discriminated against by *protecstia* (the Hebrew term for personal connections or patronage) that men have and that they give each other. So, if politics are out, women will be in. Ensuring women's entry by affirmative action also ensures that politics are out because women are outside the political networks.

The paradox of affirmative action for women directors is that the legitimation for legislating their inclusion on boards also resulted in the exclusion of women's interests as a legitimate issue on the boards' agendas.

The new culture of the men's club is seductive, and token women are under pressure to become "social males" and prove that their competence as directors, meaning that they are not significantly different from men[28] (Talmud & Izraeli, 1999). In the negotiation for status as worthy peers, emphasizing gender signals that a woman is an "imposter," someone who does not rightfully belong in the position she is claiming to fill. Speaking up for women is difficult and can even be fatal, as revealed in the following cautionary tales related to me by two women directors. One, a lawyer, reported that shortly after she and a woman economist were appointed to the board of a bank, a male member mentioned that the bank needed to recruit more qualified economists. Her female colleague suggested that competent women economists were available, following which "no one took anything she said seriously. A year later she was off the board." Another woman director reported the complaint of a women manager in the firm that she had been overlooked for promotion because she was a woman. "So, you're a feminist" was the response said in a ridiculing manner. In both instances, the women were silenced and learned that feminism would not serve them well on the board, and until they had established themselves, it could be dangerous.[29]

If we judge the affirmative action policy by its spillover effect into other public domains and its contribution to the establishment of a new norm by which equality is judged by results, then its success has been more normative and symbolic than actual. Following the Supreme Court's legitimation of affirmative action as a vehicle for achieving equality, clause 1 of the National Health Insurance Law (1994) and clause 1 of the Patients' Rights Law (1996) included the requirement of "appropriate representation" for both sexes on their respective governing bodies Affirmative action was extended to the civil service in 1995. Rather than a directive, such as one that mandated ministers to appoint women, the civil service commissioner was given discretion to determine whether, when, and what action was required to increase the number of women in civil service positions.

(One) Among employees in the government service appropriate expression will be given, conditions permitting, to the representation of both sexes/

(Two) The civil service commissioner that among the workers of an office or government unit,

> there is not the, said appropriate representation he will act to promote the appropriate representations, as much as conditions permit.[30]

This contingent formulation was a backlash against the mandatory language of the earlier directive. There was also more at stake in imposing affirmative action in the civil service, where women were already 60% of those employed. Women were underrepresented only in the most senior ranks, positions of considerable authority and control over organizational resources. Once tenured, bureaucrats are difficult to remove from office. To date, the commissioner has chosen to interpret his obligations narrowly.[31] In 1999, 4 years after the law was passed, the proportion of women in senior positions in the civil service was *lower* than it had been previously (Shaked and Bareket, 1999).

Following the Supreme Court decision, the concept of affirmative action entered the "group equality discourse," making it easier for other groups, such as Arabs and persons with disabilities, to make collective claims for a fairer distribution of resources (Ziv, 1999). The Court's support, however, has been mainly at the level of principle. For example, the Association of Civil Right in Israel, together with a number of Arab organizations, petitioned the Supreme Court demanding appropriate representation for Arab citizens on the Israel Lands Administration Council, which prior to the petition was completely devoid of Arab membership. On July 10, 2001, in a landmark ruling, the Court articulated for the first time the obligation of the state to ensure appropriate representation for Arab citizens on public bodies, especially those invested with decision-making powers. Two Arabs were appointed to the council. In another case, however, where the Association for Civil Rights petitioned the Supreme Court demanding appropriate representation for Arabs on the Committee for Planning and Construction for the northern district, where Arabs constitute more than half the population but only 1 of the 17 committee members, the Court accepted the government's position that at this time there are no Arabs in senior positions in the civil service to serve as candidates for the committee and rejected the petition on those grounds.

The Supreme Court has been the major proponent of affirmative action and of the view that it is an integral part of the principle of equality. In a judgment (Israel Women's Network v. the Minister of Labor and Welfare HC 2671/98), Supreme Court judge Mishael Cheshin established that even though there is no specific law requiring appropriate representation for women in the National Insurance Institute, the principle of equality to be applied is that of giving appropriate representation to women and men in all public bodies. Despite the Supreme Court's judgment mandating that the minister of work and welfare conduct a proper search-and-selection process and attempt to find a suitable woman for the position of associate director, the minister gave the job to a man from his political party.[32] Political interests thus prevailed.

CONCLUSION

This study of gender politics in Israel was organized around a number of apparent paradoxes related to the passage of affirmative action for women directors. This article focused on the interaction between changing social conditions as they shaped the way interests were articulated and the strategies of individual and collective social actors. The introduction of affirmative action was situated against the background of the shift from a republican citizenship discourse that emphasized women's important contribution as mothers and discriminated against them in the public sphere, to an individual liberal discourse that recognized universal civil rights. Under the new conditions of a liberal market economy, merit and professional achievement gained in importance as resources required for access to positions of influence in the economic sector, undermining the sufficiency of political loyalty.

Papanek (1989) noted that appeals to draw women into the public political process in many countries represent a clear and public statement of new political values. The woman question serves both symbolic and mobilization purposes, and different regimes use their specific stands on it as a way of signaling their political agendas. The proponents of the new liberal discourse constituted the affirmative action clause discursively to fit the broader agenda of depoliticizing the appointment system and bringing new talent into the director pool. Thus, including the woman question in the amendment to appointment procedures was, paradoxically, a way of signaling that merit, rather than politics, would prevail, since women (Jewish, educated, and of European origin) symbolize the group that is both worthy and excluded from patronage politics.

The article revealed how the state provided the arena in which gender was constructed and contested. State-sponsored commissions and the recommendations they produced, although rarely implemented, were discursively important for raising women's

consciousness about gender difference. State commissions provided spaces for women to meet, network, formulate strategies, and insert affirmative action into the political lexicon of public claims. The public debate over the amendment to the State-Owned Companies Act provided an occasion for women to press their demands for inclusion. The Supreme Court's approval of affirmative action legitimated its use as social policy, and the strong position the court took in the case of the male directors forced ministers to abide by the law.

None of these developments would have led to affirmative action were it not for the actions of women working through overlapping networks inside and outside state agencies. The establishment of the IWN provided the meeting ground and consciousness-raising experience for women professionals and academics in the civilian sector, for women politicians and sympathetic staff of various political parties, and for women who were employed in various state agencies. IWN was instrumental in getting women Knesset members to cooperate on women's issues across party lines, thus greatly amplifying women's voice in the Knesset. Feminist organizations urged women professionals to present their candidacy and negotiated with gatekeepers to appoint women as directors. Ultimately, however, it was the successful work of the IWN legal center and the support of the Supreme Court that transformed affirmative action from policy to practice.

It was in the interest of powerful men to support this process. The move to a primary system within the political parties, feminist pressure for greater representation, and the newly established Knesset Committee on the Status of Women made women a constituency to be reckoned with by male politicians who became the policy's determined sponsors. The policy passed through the efforts of male politicians who perceived it to be politically correct to champion the cause of women's representation on the boards of state-owned companies and who were strategically located to make it happen. Using their political clout and acumen, they were able to overcome opposition as the proposal moved through the various ratifying bodies of the state. It passed also because affirmative action, as conceived, did not violate strongly vested interests and was not strongly contested. The male government ministers who stood to lose by the amendment were more concerned about the limitation on their use of directors' appointments for the purposes of patronage. The requirement to appoint women was of secondary concern, particularly because the escape clause led ministers to believe they could evade the requirement to appoint women if they wished to do so. Its application was confined to state-owned companies where appointments are for a limited term of office. Representatives of other interest groups viewed it as precedent for their future benefit.

The substantive harvest of these efforts to date has been meager. A few hundred already privileged women benefited, but the ripple effect extending to a wider community is not yet evident. The women generally do not see their role as promoting the interests of other women in the organizations in which they are directors. As Ferguson (1984: 2) noted:

> Feminist responses to the woman question have been complex and varied. An early and still common response is to claim entry for women into the world that men reserved for themselves by hurling a loud "Me too!" at the wall of arrogance and exclusion. While there are still good political reasons for retreating to this position on occasion, the response challenges only the answers to the woman question not its terms.

However, women directors, by virtue of their common location in male-dominated environments, constitute a quasi-group, which under appropriate circumstances could be mobilized to form a supportive community for each other and for other women. Their recruitment to "the cause" may require the intervention of a feminist organization or a state-sponsored agency. Through collective consciousness-raising, women's incorporation on boards could be reframed and given new meaning—one that includes responsibility for promoting women's interests in their respective companies.

ENDNOTES

1. This is the first study of the introduction of affirmative action for women in Israel. For a legal analysis of the law, see Raday (1995) and Tirosh (1999). The data for this article are based on numerous sources, including materials collected during my participation, for over 20 years, in all the commissions and committees on women mentioned in this article and participation in a training course for women directors and lecturer in such courses, protocols of the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee of the Knesset, Knesset protocol, archives of the Israel Women's Network, a study of men and women directors conducted under my supervision (Markovitch, 1998), the media, and interviews with approximately 15 people who were associated with these events, including state officials and men and women directors.
2. Although not discussed in this article, the beginning of the peace process opened a public space for raising the issue of women's representation. In Israel, presumably

as elsewhere when the canons fire, voices opposing gender inequality are silenced. The centrality of the military in Israeli society has important implications for women's status in civil society (Izraeli, 1997).

3. In actuality, affirmative action (as some argue) is counter to a strict merit system, since it favors those who are disadvantaged by certain status characteristics. Since women had to be nominated, women's networks were used to find nominees and hence became a form of patronage. I am grateful to Judith Lorber for this insight. See Lorber's (2000) critique of Jackson.
4. In her cross-national study of affirmative action, Bacchi (1996) noted that in the United States, the category "women" is an addendum, rather than a starting place, for the formulation of affirmative action policy.
5. Israel has a multiparty system with over 15 parties represented in each successive Knesset. For example, orthodox religious groups have their own parties. On three occasions, a party ran as a "woman's party" but succeeded only once in getting a woman elected to the Knesset Each of the two major parties, the left-wing Labor Party and the right-wing Likud Party, has a woman's caucus (see Herzog, 1996).
6. State-owned companies refer to government-controlled companies, that is, companies in which the state owns at least 51% of the voting shares. Ministers appoint directors to companies within their respective jurisdictions, in conjunction with the minister of the treasury. Appointments are for a 3-year renewable term of office. Each board is comprised of two kinds of directors: those representing the state and selected from among senior civil servants and those from the public at large. Section 60 of the amendment extended the application of the affirmative action clause to additional 150 agencies and corporations created by law, such as the Port Authority, Consumer Protection Authority, and the Authority for the War against Narcotics. There were many companies in which directorships were not filled, particularly directors representing the state, so that the number of directorships was greater than the actual number of directors, more than 1000. At the time, directors were not remunerated financially for their services. (For a study of governmental corporations, see Aharoni, 1991.)
7. The Hebrew term *holem* could be alternatively translated as suitable, befitting, or adequate.
8. In Israel, women were the best-organized group and provided the model for other interest groups: children's rights, disability rights, Arab, and gay rights groups. For example, in 2001, the affirmative action provision in the State-owned Companies Law and in the Civil Service (Appointments) Law was extended to include members of the Arab minority.
9. In this article, the term *Arabs*, not *Palestinians*, is used, since that was the term commonly used at the time. Arabs constituted 20% of the population but only 5% of those employed in the civil service at any level. There were no Arab directors in governmental companies.
10. The government bailed out the banks by taking nominal ownership (Shalev, 1999: 135).
11. Swirski and Safir (1991) chose to call their edited volume of articles on women in Israel: *Calling the Equality Bluff.*
12. The recognition of women as a special interest group may be traced to the founding convention of the Histadrut—the General Federation of Labor (1920), when the leaders of the Women Workers' Movement, a feminist movement within the Labor Movement protested their underrepresentation among the delegates and the failure of the convention to deal with the special problems that women pioneers faced in finding employment (see Bernstein, 1987; Izraeli, 1981). The convention voted to reserve two places on the governing body of the Histadrut for representatives of the Women Workers' Movement. The first-generation feminist movement was co-opted by the Labor-dominated state.
13. Until 1999, women never constituted more than 10% of the 120 members of the Knesset.
14. Although a study by the IWN (1989) revealed that few of the commission's recommendations were implemented, its documentation of widespread pay and promotion discrimination in governmental service contributed significantly to shattering the myth of Israeli women's equality (Izraeli, 1981). The 2 years during which the commission members met also had a strong consciousness-raising effect on its 90-plus members (Izraeli, 1993), many of whom were women in positions of influence.
15. Told to me by Yehudit Hibner, leading member of the women's caucus of the National Religious Party, who became chair of the women's subcommittee.
16. Unlike women's organizations in the United States, women's organizations in Israel did not form alliances across gender with other oppressed groups. This made it possible for the mainstream women's organizations to include Jewish women who were both left wing and right wing in their politics concerning peace issues on the basis of their commonality as women. Women's organizations include Arab women members and serve Arab women as women. For example, they sponsor child care services and occupational training. The exclusion of other bases of oppression also supported the hegemony of the traditional leadership—middle class, educated, and of European American origin (Dahan-Kalev, 1997; Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1992).
17. I thank Susan Sered, for this insight.
18. In 1992, Naamat, the oldest and largest women's organization affiliated with the Labor Party, established a training course attended by over 60 women would be directors the first of its kind in Israel. At the time, there were no courses to train men to be directors.
19. In The IWN Archives (1985–1995), I found correspondence between women of these organizational and an exchange of lists of prominent professional women with instructions to send them the form letter.
20. I could not find a record of how many firms were sent the form letter signed by Professor Alice Shalvi, chair of IWN, originally dated January 5, 1987.
21. Davida Lachman-Messer told me that she discussed the matter with Carmel Shalev, "the leading figure on this topic with us." (Personal communication, 1995). Confirmed by Shalev in a personal communication, July 1999.
22. When I asked Dedi Zucker (personal interview, August 30, 1999) why he was so committed to passing the affirmative action amendment, he explained: "I am a child of the 60s. I was involved in the liberation movements." Later, he added: "At the time (1992) it was not difficult to propose legislation for advancing gender equality; it was bon ton. It gained me a great deal of popularity in my own party; they [women members] loved me for it."

23. When MK Ron Nachman Likud (Divrei HaKnesset, 1993c:4059) commented, "Mr. Minister of Justice, you will agree with me that when we make a quota for women and allot a fixed number of places for women it is insulting and offensive," MK Limor Livnat (Likud) exclaimed, "You are insulted for me?...I am not insulted."
24. In October 2001, almost a decade later, the Committee of Ministers, in response to pressure from the religious parties, agreed to recognize the rabbinical seminary as equivalent to a college education for the purpose of serving as a director. The governmental decision needs Knesset approval.
25. The following incident, referred to in the judgment, reveals the way in which the judge "educated" the lawyers representing the IWN to look after women's interests. The judge asked the lawyers whether they demanded that preference be given to women only in cases in which women had the same qualifications as the male candidates or whether it was sufficient that women have adequate qualifications. The lawyers, presumably concerned about not devaluing the achievements of women who would be appointed as a result of affirmative action, insisted that the women should be preferred only when they had identical qualifications to the male candidates. The judge retorted that he would adopt a more flexible test, one that scrutinized the relevance of the relative advantage of the male candidates, in light of the centrality of the principle of affirmative action. "For example, if the advantage of the male candidate over a competing female candidate stemmed from his having a wealth of experience, especially from having served on a number of boards, I would tend to view this advantage as a basis for preferring him only if it were proved that, under the circumstances, such experience was worthy of being granted special weight as for example, if there were few experienced directors on the board" (High Court, 1994 Clause 28). In the future, in every case in which preference was not given to the woman candidate, the burden of proof that a suitable woman could not be found, given a reasonable effort, would rest with the appointing minister.
26. According to Gelb (1989: 104), the willingness and power of the U.S. courts to uphold affirmative action, in contrast to the courts in the United Kingdom and Sweden where this was not the case, was an important factor in enhancing the effectiveness of the equal opportunity machinery in the United States.
27. In a study of women directors in New Zealand, McGregor (1997) noted that once a woman was on a board of directors, her acculturation increased the likelihood of her being invited to join additional boards.
28. Markovitch (1998) found that many of these women directors operated on the basis of tacit knowledge that competence and femininity were contradictory achievements, a perception found repeatedly in studies by social psychologists. This conflict is implicit in Mathis's (1997: 18) finding for U.S. directors who wanted "to be recognized for their expertise rather than their gender."
29. Despite their insistence that their being women was not relevant in the boardroom, many "did gender" quite consciously and strategically (West & Zimmerman, 1987). They sought to fashion a stance that signaled both competence and femininity but did not suggest sexuality. They wanted to be noticed and were, more or less consciously, aware that they were perceived to be women; however, they did not want attention to be paid to them as "typical" women but as a new type of competent woman. Toward this end, they were careful not only about what they said but how they looked. For example, one director told Markovitch (1998): "I never wear my hair loose at board meetings. I always keep it neatly pinned up." Another said that she always wore slacks and long sleeves: "I am the only woman on the board. I always dress businesslike, but I keep my legs and arms covered. I don't wear skirts. I don't want anyone staring at my legs, arms, or bust." Other women emphasized that they considered that being attractive was an asset in their interactions with men and accepted compliments about their appearance with pleasure.
30. The phrasing of the amendment, passed in September 1995, may be compared to that of affirmative action for directors:

    This is a watered-down version of the law proposed by MK Dedi Zucker, then chair of the law committee, that passed the preliminary reading. Zucker proposed compulsory affirmative action for the top four ranks of the civil service.

31. Tirosh (1999) argued convincingly that the wording and spirit of the law provided the commissioner with wide discretionary powers to promote equal opportunity, including applying affirmative action in recruitment, tenders, promotion, and training, as well eliminating practices, such as temporary appointments prior to tender, which gave an advantage to those (men) in such positions. In a letter to Frances Raday (previously head of the IWN legal center), the chairperson of the committee responsible for monitoring the application of amendment 7 of the civil service the law, the civil service commissioner, Mr. Shmuel Hollander, wrote as follows:

    In principle, I agree with you that one should seek women candidates also for temporary appointments [until the position is filled by tender]. At the same time, it must be said that temporary appointments are within the authority of the management of the ministry and the civil service commissioner is not able to impose a temporary appointment in opposition to the wish of the ministry (cited in Tirosh, 1999: 27–28).
    Since such appointments gave the candidate an advantage when the tender committee met, and the candidate was most likely to get the job. Raday viewed this as an important issue over which she finally resigned as chair of the committee.

32. The minister played by the rules and publicized the position in the newspapers. The court, however, did not mandate him to hire a woman, nor did it require him to justify his choice or to permit the process to be monitored to assure that it was conducted in good faith. One of the women candidates who was objectively more qualified for the position considered taking the case to the labor court, but decided not to.

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