

# In Israeli politics, a new dawn for women

More females are filling leadership roles, but gender equality in the Knesset is not yet the standard

BY ELHANAN MILLER | January 17, 2013, 9:08 pm |

**T**EL AVIV — Two women stepped on to a sleek stage at Tel Aviv's refurbished port this week. One had just ended her first term as the youngest Knesset member, elected at the tender age of 30. The other is about to enter the Israeli parliament for the first time; but after years in the media, hers is a household name, especially here in the city that never rests.

Only late in October did Merav Michaeli, the newcomer, announce that she was joining politics. Less than three months later, she is fifth on the Labor list, its second female voice after party leader Shelly Yachimovich.

Michaeli, a former Haaretz columnist who wrote about feminism, told the audience — mostly Anglo immigrants invited by the [Tel Aviv International Salon](#) to sip wine in plastic cups and bask in Israeli politics — that she has been politically engaged for years, but now decided “to step up and do it on a bigger scale.”

Tzipi Hotovely, her opponent in this debate, said that she decided to enter the political world in order to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state “like the one Ariel Sharon wanted to establish.” Ranked 16th on the Likud-Beytenu list, Hotovely is her party's top woman on the joint roster, surpassed only by Yisrael Beytenu's Sofa Landver.

The two women — Michaeli, in black jeans and fashionable black boots; and Hotovely, clad in a long dress and thick socks — seemed to epitomize the dichotomy between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Ostensibly, they could scarcely be more different. Yet as symbols of the rising power of women in Israeli politics, they were remarkably similar.

Self-confident and extremely eloquent even in their non-native English, they both landed in politics from Israeli TV and would both like to see far-reaching changes in Israeli society. Finally, both made very little fuss about being women (Michaeli's idiosyncratic tendency to address both genders in the feminine notwithstanding).

Six women currently lead Israeli parties, three of which are sure to enter the 19th Knesset: Labor, led by Shelly Yachimovich; Hatnua, headed by Tzipi Livni, and Meretz, led by Zahava Gal-On. Never before have so many women been in leadership roles in Israel.

“There is certainly lots of female energy in this election campaign,” said Shavit Ben-Arie, who recently published a book about female politicians in Israel. “It's one of the most gender-focused

election campaigns in Israeli history; the culmination of a decade of feminist ascendancy.”

The importance of women’s voices in politics has been picked up by most parties ahead of the January 22 vote, notes Ben-Arie, but hasn’t completely trickled down to the voting public. Israeli parties officially began reserving spots on their slates for women in the 1990s, but unofficially the practice could be dated to the first elections of 1949, he said.

Even before the recent primaries in Labor, the party convened a conference of women running for office. The Likud called a similar gathering.

“Whether or not these women win realistic spots, the parties are essentially saying: ‘we are taking heed of this agenda,’” Ben-Arie argued.

It was the primaries system, introduced into Israeli politics by Labor in 1992 and subsequently adopted by other parties, that brought about the change in women’s status. Between 1977 and 1999, the Likud list habitually featured only two women, but that began to change when primaries became the party’s political standard. In 2003, seven women received realistic spots on the list.

Parties still vary significantly on the importance given to female representation, however. Left-wing Meretz has adopted the “zipper” principle, where every other candidate (not necessarily in sequence) is a woman. But the second woman on Tzipi Livni’s list comes in only at number 10; and Ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and Agudat Yisrael, part of the United Torah Judaism slate, feature no women at all. The first woman on the United Arab List is in the 13th spot, with almost no chance of getting in.

Jerusalem councilwoman Laura Varton appealed to the Central Elections Committee in December, requesting to disqualify Shas and Aguda for discrimination against women. The fact that the two parties prevent women from running in their party statutes, argued Varton, placed them at odds with Israel’s democratic character; cause enough for their banning. Varton’s appeal was unanimously overruled.

Most women in the Knesset — even those who entered as feminist activists — lose interest in women’s issues once in office, Ben-Arie noted. Tzipi Livni publicly admitted that she had no interest in such issues before taking office. But that is starting to change.

“This election campaign is a watershed,” said Ben-Arie. “The fact that Knesset speaker Rueven Rivlin stepped down one spot in the Likud list to allow Sofa Landver to be placed among the top ten demonstrates the impact of public discourse surrounding women’s issues.”

As the debate in Tel Aviv drew to a close, Michaeli was suddenly taken aback. “I can’t believe we’ve spent the entire evening without speaking about feminism,” she said.

“We discussed policy; that’s true feminism,” Hotovely replied.