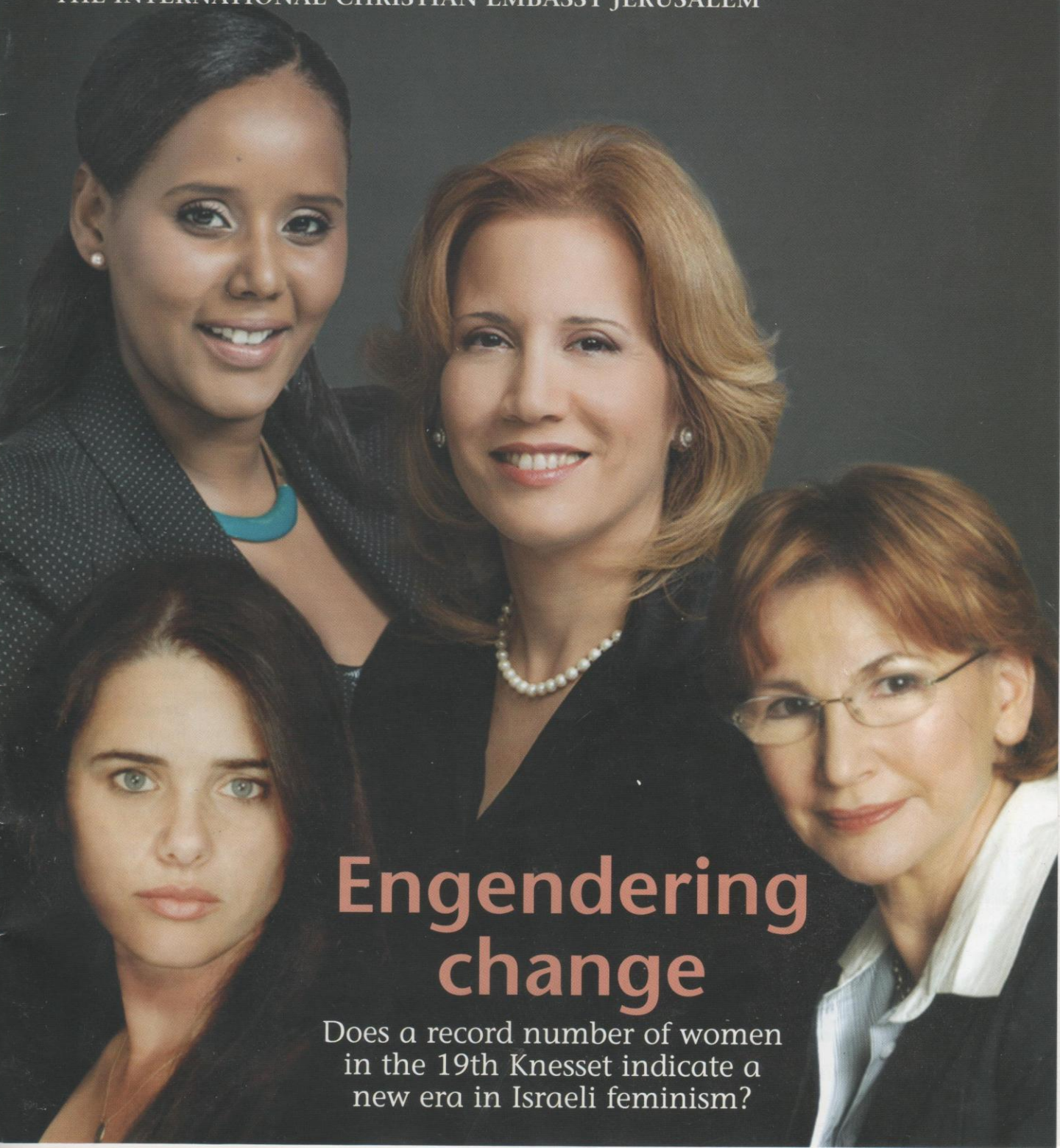


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Engendering change

Does a record number of women
in the 19th Knesset indicate a
new era in Israeli feminism?

Women in power

Did the 2013 election for Knesset mark a breakthrough for Israeli female politicians?



KNESSET MEMBERS (from left) Yifat Kariv (Yesh Atid), Stav Shaffir (Labor), Michal Roisin (Meretz) and Michal Biran (Labor) sign a declaration of women's rights, on International Women's Day in March. (Gideon Markowicz/Flash90)

• BY EMANUEL MFOUKOU

Last month, Margaret Thatcher passed away to both glowing tributes and equally forceful ridicule. The "Iron Lady" of

British politics had risen from a shopkeeper's daughter to be a chemist, a barrister and eventually the prime minister of the United Kingdom and a key player in the West's ultimate triumph in the Cold War.

Strong, capable women who enter politics have often stirred such polarizing reactions, and Israel has had its share of them. Golda Meir was one of the first female leaders of a Western democracy and was also

known for her candor and toughness. David Ben-Gurion was oft inclined to describe her as the “best man in my cabinet,” and her strong will as Israel’s fourth prime minister saw the nation through some of its most difficult times – including the highly traumatic Yom Kippur War.

The current Knesset, elected in January, has a record number of 27 women, 16 of them first-term lawmakers.

‘There is no doubt that Israeli politics is essentially masculine’

– Aliza Lavie

The world’s first female democratic ruler in modern times was Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who was elected prime minister of Sri Lanka in 1960. She was followed by India’s Indira Gandhi in 1966 and Golda Meir in Israel in 1969.

Today, several powerful women are playing crucial roles in the international arena, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, her Argentine counterpart Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President of South Korea Park Guen-hye, and Africa’s first female leader, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia.

Securing their place in society and equal treatment in the public arena has been a long, uphill battle for women. New Zealand was the first nation to grant truly universal suffrage to both men and women in 1893. The first European country to do so was Finland, which gave women the right to vote without any preconditions in 1906. Finland also was the first nation to allow women to stand in elections, and in 1907 a “wave” of 19 women won seats in the Finnish parliament.

Today, the Scandinavian countries remain the undisputed world champions when it comes to female inclusion in legislative bodies. In

Sweden some 44.7% of the parliament is made up of women, while Norway and Denmark come in at 39.6% and 39.1% respectively. Meantime, the single country with the most women in parliament is currently the East African nation of Rwanda, with 56.3%.

Yet obstacles to the full inclusion of women in politics persist elsewhere. Women in Saudi Arabia are still unable to vote, but in 2011 King Abdullah announced that they would be given the right to vote as well as run for office in the 2015 municipal elections.

So how does Israel stack up today when it comes to women in politics? If one would use the Knesset as a measuring stick for Israeli democracy, the recent parliamentary elections saw a bumper crop of female candidates winning seats, many for the first time. The results place Israel well ahead of many Western democracies.

Israel’s 27 female MKs (out of 120 members) places it 61st in world rankings at 22.5% of parliament,

according to a newly released report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (the last Knesset had just 23 women by the time it left office). This is slightly behind the United Kingdom and noticeably ahead of the United States, where out of the 535 total members of Congress, 100 are women. Israelis might fall behind the Nordic countries, but they are far ahead of their Arab neighbors. Both Jordan and war-torn Syria have 12% female representation in parliament, while Lebanon has 3.1% and Egypt a paltry 2%.

The 19th Knesset parallels both the European standard (23.7%) and the worldwide average (20.4%) when it comes to female representation in parliament. In addition, the country’s 33rd government, sworn in last month, contains the highest-ever rate of female cabinet ministers at 18%, representing four ministers.

The highest-ranking woman in the current Israeli government is Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, who recently left Kadima and started the new “Hatnua” (Movement) party, ➡



TZIPI LIVNI is the most senior female minister in the current government.

(Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)



SHELLY YACIMOVICH is head of the Labor Party and of the opposition.

(Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

which secured six mandates in the current Knesset.

A former foreign minister, Livni nearly landed the premiership in the 2009 elections and was listed by *Newsweek* in 2011 as "one of 150 women who shook the world." Her present role in the coalition government includes a place on the inner security cabinet and oversight of any renewed negotiations with the Palestinians.

Meantime, the leader of the opposition is MK Shelly Yacimovich of Labor, who is spearheading a resurgence for the party that founded and long ruled the country, though she is facing leadership challenges from within the party.

For a better picture of the challenges faced by women in Israeli politics, *The Jerusalem Post Christian Edition* recently spoke with Dr. Aliza Lavie, a new Knesset member from the brand new Yesh Atid Party, which captured a surprising 19 seats in parliament.

One of the 16 first-term female members in the newest Knesset, Lavie was a researcher and senior lecturer in the School of Communication at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, and is best known nationwide for authoring *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book*.

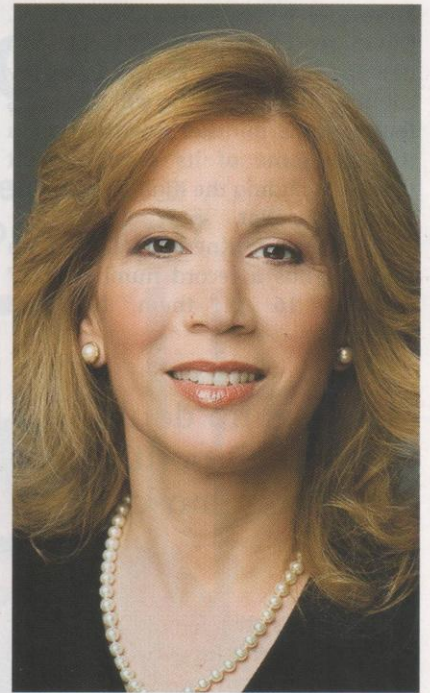
"The first challenge is to create total equality between men and women," she insisted. "There is no doubt that Israeli politics is essentially masculine. Although there are quite a few women, the atmosphere remains male. Women are still considered exceptional in certain areas such as defense and religious institutions, and in many public committees there is no female representation."

'There have been a few waves of feminism throughout Israel, the first one came as a result of the struggle for women to vote under the British Mandate'

— Shavit Ben-Arie

Lavie acknowledges the clear trend of women increasingly fitting into the public arena, as seen in the composition of the current Knesset. But Lavie cautions that "the path is still long, and we should strive to reach a situation where the number of women in positions of public leadership, spiritual and political, the clerk who works faithfully, reflects the general population — meaning it will not be less than 50%."

Lavie expects to be appointed as chairwoman of the Knesset Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women and hopes to use that role to reduce the large gaps between men and women, including a targeted approach to promoting gender equality in employment and wages. She will also seek to address



MK ALIZA LAVIE: 'The first challenge is to create total equality between men and women.'

(Courtesy Yesh Atid)

imbalances regarding marital status, health and education.

"In addition, women in Israel are still under threat of violence from within and outside the family, and we intend to treat this problem too," Lavie assured.

Lavie remains optimistic that the situation for women in Israeli politics will improve in the years to come.

"We are in a good place in society compared to 10 years ago, and I believe that we will continue to move forward and in another 10 years the situation in society will be even far better," she said.

Lavie, 48, is married with four children and one granddaughter, and has already brought her special brand of religious feminism to government. On the morning of her swearing-in, Lavie distributed copies of the prayer said by the prophetess Deborah, in the Book of Judges, to all 27 female MKs. She explained that Jewish women traditionally recite the prayer upon

assuming positions of leadership.

"Over 3,000 years ago, in the days of Deborah the prophetess, it was a strange phenomenon to see a female public leader, and in Jewish history, few women held public positions over time," Lavie said. "Now there is a record number of women in the Knesset, and we cannot ignore the positive trend. My prayer is that together with female MKs, we will faithfully represent Israeli women and act together to promote their status in society."

Meanwhile, *The Christian Edition* also spoke with Shavit Ben-Arie, author of *Female Members of the Knesset: Leading Women in Israel*, a book dealing with the history of women in the Israeli parliament from 1949 until 2011. He gave an overview of female involvement in Israeli and Zionist politics, beginning in the early 20th century.

"There have been a few waves of feminism throughout Israel, the first one came as a result of the struggle for women to vote under the British Mandate, and it was during this period that several parties for women were founded," he said. "In 1920, when elections for the Assembly of Representatives of the Palestinian Jewish community took place, several parties representing women were present.

"Some of the most successful parties in the pre-state period and which were made up of women only, were the Women's Association Party, the Popular Hebraic Women's Union, the Torah and Labor Women's List, and the Mizrahi Movement and Unaffiliated Religious Women," he said. "Some of these parties were elected in all Zionist assemblies until Israel's first election took place, a year after the Declaration of Independence."

Eleven women were elected to that first Knesset.

Ben-Arie explained that the formal Israeli feminist movement only connected with the international one in the 1970s. The leader of Israeli



STAV SHAFFIR, 27, is the youngest member of the new Knesset. (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

feminists at the time, Marcia Freedman, was elected to the Knesset on the Meretz list in 1973.

"Freedman was an American immigrant who had seen the struggle of African-Americans during the civil rights movement. She arrived in Israel in the 1960s and started to promote the establishment of daycare centers next to work places, and brought up the subject of battered women, family violence and abortion. That way the feminist movement in Israel became part of the system."

Until 1990, the Labor Party was the faction with the most women in government. But in 1992, the larger parties started holding primary elections, allowing the general membership to select the list of candidates for the Knesset while also reserving slots for women. This all led to an increase in female candidates among the various parties.

"The Likud is a great example for how this changed the representation

of women," Ben-Arie noted. "From 1949 to 1999, they only had one or two women and from 1999 you can see a big difference starting to take place."

Today, seven of the 21 Likud MKs are women, with veteran lawmaker Limor Livnat serving as the culture and sport minister, the third cabinet post she has held in her more than 20 years in parliament. She is most noted for opening competition and lowering consumer rates in the telephone and cable TV sectors while serving as communications minister in the 1990s.

But Ben-Arie maintains that Golda Meir remains the most esteemed female politician in Israeli history. In total, she held ministerial posts for 15 years and was the only woman to serve as a cabinet minister during the first 26 years of Israel's modern existence.

When prime minister Levi Eshkol died in 1969, Meir was unanimously seen as his natural replacement.

"Golda Meir wasn't perceived as [just] a woman, she was always up there and no one said that she was the only woman," Ben-Arie stated. Surprisingly, she did not appoint a single woman in her government, not even as deputy ministers or to other significant positions.

After her, there were only five female cabinet ministers until 1995. This included Shulamit Aloni, Sara Doron, Ora Namir and Shoshana Arbeli. The latter remains the longest serving woman in the Knesset. After making aliya to Israel from Iraq in 1947, Arbeli served a total of 26 years in the Knesset as a member of the Labor faction and eventually climbed to the post of health minister.

It remains to be seen whether the 2013 election will mark yet another breakthrough for women in Israeli politics. But the unprecedented influx of young, first-time female MKs is encouraging and they will certainly strive to leave their mark – and cracks in the glass ceiling – in the Jewish state.