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Women's Representation in the Legislature and the executive in Israel and Worldwide

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Below we present data on the representation of women in the legislature and the executive, in Israel and worldwide. The data, encompassing 175 nations, comes from the Human Development Data Base of the United Nations Development Agency.

The Agency's data generally relate to the years 1994 and 1995; some of it relates to prior years, and some to 1997. We updated the data on women's representation in the Israeli Cabinet to include the present administration.

The report reveals that the representation of Israeli women in the Knesset and the Cabinet is very low by international standards.

Women's Representation in the Legislature

In the present Knesset, which at this writing is about to disperse, there are 9 women - 7.5% of all members of Knesset.

According to the UN Development Agency's Human Development Data Base, this proportion places Israel in 57th place among the 94 nations for which data exist for 1997. By way of comparison, in the Scandinavian countries women represent, on average, 37% of members of the legislatures, and in the nations of western and southern Europe, 18%.

Women's representation in the Knesset is, in fact, lower than that of most groups of countries in the world: women's average representation in the industrialized nations overall is 13.6%; in the nations of North America, 12.0%; in Latin America, 9.6%; and in the developing nations overall, 12.7%. The only group of nations where women's representation in the legislatures was lower, on average, than in Israel was southern Asia, where the figure was 6.9%.

Table 1. Percentage of Women in the Legislature, Israel and Worldwide

	% of women in the legislature, 1997
Scandinavia	37.0%
Western and Southern Europe	18.0%
Industrialized nations	13.6%
Developing nations	12.7%
North America	12.0%
Latin America and the Caribbean	9.6%
<i>Israel</i>	<i>7.5%</i>
Southern Asia	6.9%

Women's Representation in the Executive

In the present Cabinet of Israel there is one woman minister - 6% of all members of the Cabinet.

This proportion puts Israel in 84th place among 170 nations for which the UN has published figures (the data for the other nations are for 1995).

Here, too, Israel lags far behind the majority of states: in the Scandinavian countries, the average rate of representation for women in government is 40%; in North America, 21%; in western and southern Europe, 14%; in the industrialized nations overall, 12%; in Latin America and the Caribbean, 8%; and in sub-Saharan Africa, 7%.

The level of women's representation in the Israeli Cabinet is, in fact, identical to the average rate for the developing nations: 6%. Only in one group of nations was the rate of women's representation lower than in Israel: in southern Asia, at 4%.

Table 2. Percentage of Women in the Cabinet, Israel and Worldwide

	% of ministerial positions held by women, 1995
Scandinavia	40%
North America	21%
Western and Southern Europe	14%
Industrialized nations	12%
Latin America and the Caribbean	8%
Sub-Saharan Africa	7%
Developing nations	6%
<i>Israel</i>	6%*
Southern Asia	4%

* The data for Israel relate to January 1999.

Women's Representation in the Legislature and the Executive and the Nation's Economic Status

Israel's low ranking with respect to representation of women in political life is inconsistent with its high ranking in terms of per capita economic output. When we rank the nations included in the UN survey by fifths, we find that, from the standpoint of per capita GNP, Israel is among the top one-fifth of all nations. In contrast, women's representation in government places Israel in the third fifth, and women's representation in the Knesset, in the fourth fifth.

Table 3. Israel's Comparative National Ranking: GNP, Secondary Schooling for Girls, and Women's Representation in the Legislature and the Executive

	Per capita gross national product	No. girls in secondary school per 100,000	% of women in the legislature	% of women in the executive
Top fifth	X	X		
2nd fifth				
3rd fifth				X
4 th fifth			X	
Lowest fifth				

Although the educational system provides Israeli women with the tools that could be translated into a higher rate of representation in politics and government, the nation's economic structure and its military-security apparatus pull the other way, as will become clear shortly.

Women's Representation in the Legislature and Executive and the Economic Status of Women

Considering Israel's high economic ranking, one might have expected a higher representation of women in politics - on a level more like that of other countries with a favorable economic status.

In Israel, however, overall economic wealth does not translate into economic strength for women to the same degree as it does in other states with equivalent economic ranking.

Table 4 presents the low comparative international ranking of Israeli women on three economic indices. Israeli women's participation in the labor market is relatively low, as is working women's share of wages and of management positions. On all three indices, Israel places in the third fifth, despite its place in the top fifth on the basis of per capita GNP.

Table 4. Women's Economic Status, Israel and Worldwide

	Women in the labor force 1990	Women's share of total wages 1994	Women's share of management positions 1990
Scandinavia	47%	43%	45%
North America	45%	40%	72%
Industrialized nations	44%	38%	44%
Sub-Saharan Africa	42%	36%	12%
Western and Southern Europe	40%	34%	29%
Developing nations	39%	32%	12%
<i>Israel</i>	38%	33%	23%
Latin America and the Caribbean	32%	27%	26%
Southern Asia	31%	25%	3%

Note:

Since 1990, Israeli women's representation in the labor force has risen, to 44%. This rate of participation remains low when compared internationally. The low labor-force participation of Israeli women is particularly conspicuous when one examines the 25-54 age group - the principal working years for most of the population: in Israel, only 65% of women in that age range work outside the home, compared with 86% in Sweden, 82% in Denmark, 79% in France, 76% in the USA and 75% in Germany (Adva Center, [Israel, A Social Report, 1998](#), p.16).

Women's Representation in the Legislature and Executive and the Centrality of the Military

Another factor tied to women's low representation in politics and government in Israel is the centrality of the military in public life. The pivotal role of the military may be inferred from the nation's high military and security-related expenditures: this spending, when measured relative to GNP, places Israel in the top fifth in the world.

The army is a male world, in the main, and does not offer women public visibility nor serve them as a springboard into politics and government as it does for men.

An examination of the UN data points to a connection between security-related expenditures and women's representation in politics: the greater the proportion of GNP devoted to military spending, the lower women's representation in the legislature and in the Cabinet.

Table 5. Security Expenditures as a Percentage of GNP, Israel and Worldwide

	Security expenditures (as a percentage of GNP) <i>1995</i>
Israel	9.2%
North America	3.6%
Southern Asia	3.2%
Developing nations	3.1%
Industrialized nations	2.7%
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.6%
Scandinavia	2.4%
Western and Southern Europe	2.2%
Latin America and the Caribbean	1.5%

On women in politics in Israel, see the following:

Herzog, Hannah. 1994. *Realistic Women: Women in Local Politics in Israel*. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies (Hebrew).

Yishai, Yael. 1997. *Between the Flag and the Banner: Women in Israeli Politics*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.