

# **ISRAEL**

## **THE QUESTIONNAIRE TO GOVERNMENTS ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION (1995) AND THE OUTCOME OF THE 23<sup>RD</sup> SPECIAL SPESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

The State of Israel herein respectfully submits its response to the United Nations' Questionnaire to Governments in preparation for the Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action and the outcome documents of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session, scheduled to be held in 2005 at the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly.

We are proud to submit our responses to this questionnaire, detailing our many achievements and addressing the obstacles we still face in securing true equality for all women in the State of Israel.

## **Part One: A Brief Analytical Overview of Implementation of the Platform for Action: Achievements and Challenges in Promotion Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment**

In the past few years, there has been a distinctive change in the tone of public discourse in Israel: in government and Parliament and in the written press and the electronic media, including news and talk shows, the debate is increasingly gender-oriented. Discussion of budget cuts in welfare and health, proposed new legislation regarding adoption, discussion of retirement age, and in many other areas, women are speaking out as women, claiming their rights, exploring gender differences, and interjecting gender-perspective and gender equality into all aspects of public and private life.

This debate is also increasing more inclusive. It is less hegemonic than in the past, and less controlled by veteran Israeli women and feminists. Israel is rapidly adopting a more multi-dimensional and multi-cultural perspective on feminism in particular and in society in general. Thus, the needs of minority women and women of color – including Bedouin women, Ethiopian immigrant women, women who immigrated to Israel from the Former Soviet Union, and others whose voice was not heard before – are participating in the debate, and making their needs, hopes, and expectations heard.

Knowledge, we believe, is power, and to this end, the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women has made great efforts to disseminate materials that will help women to understand their rights and entitlements; these efforts have included media campaigns and publication of a comprehensive Guide to Women's Rights. This guide also includes an extensive listing of all women's organizations and the services they provide. As we note below, "knowledge is power" also means the generation of knowledge about the lives of real women, to which the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women is deeply committed.

Below, we have detailed some of our achievements and the obstacles that we still face in our quest for true gender equality. Following the guidelines given to us, in this section, we will highlight an area of achievement in which Israel has made particular progress: violence against women.

As noted in our previous reports, Israel has had extensive, feminist legislation regarding violence against women for well-over a decade; much of this legislation was authored by feminist NGO's, in coordination with the Knesset (Parliament) Committee of the Status of Women and reflects a perspective on human rights and equality, rather than a singular focus on prevention of violence. We note with satisfaction that gender-based violence against women has undergone broad legal reforms and captured extensive government and public attention and action.

Legislation regarding sexual harassment and stalking have taken this corpus much further. Both laws, brought into law in the past few years, are based on recognition of women's rights and are grounded in feminist legal jurisprudence and a commitment to the empowerment of women and gender equality.

The Prevention of Sexual Harrassment Law, augmented by several high-profile cases of sexual harassment have created public awarness and readiness for public change. The Stalking Law, passed in 2001, is based on a feminist understanding of the crime of stalking (rather than on the concept of “celebrity stalking”) and provides for protection for the victim and punishment of the offender accordingly. Both of these laws are based on concepts of women’s “Dignity and Liberty”, and are thus affirmative statements that gender-based violence or even the credible threat of such violence are not “merely” a threat to a particular women’s physical safety; rather, they are an affront to that woman’s, and all women’s, basic rights to dignity and liberty in society.

Overall, we note an impressive wave of legislation. Moreover, the emerging alliance of diverse governmental actions concerning women’s status with numerous legislative achievements points to the beginning of a heightened awareness of women’s needs and the steps necessary to address them. Taken together, these legislative advances and political activities represent an unequivocal declaration of public policy against gender discrimination and for women’s equality.

Israel is a vibrant, dynamic, and rapidly changing country, with an active civil society and an assertive feminist movement. However, the ongoing threat to Israel’s security and to our very existence continue to divert our physical and psycho-social resources to our defense against terror and aggression, rather being free to devote these energies to bettering our society and guaranteeing equality and wellbeing for all our citizens.

**Part Two: Progress in Implementation of the Critical Areas of Concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Further Initiatives and Actions Identified in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly.**

The Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women and the government and the Parliament, are the bodies that relevant United Nations Documents do serve as the basis for our planning and inform our analyses and goals.

Following the guidelines included with this questionnaire, we cite below some of our most relevant achievements with regard to the Strategic Objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action.

**Women and Poverty**

In the summer of 2003, the proposed cutbacks led to a massive protest by single mothers, some of whom walked and trekked as much as 200 miles to Jerusalem to demonstrate outside the Finance Minister's Offices. The protest received extensive – and nearly universally sympathetic – media coverage; almost all of the NGO's and activists' groups, including some of the most mainstream and even more conservatively-oriented women's groups, supported the protestors. Some of these groups organized spontaneously to provide logistical support, food and water, child care, etc.

The demonstration did, in fact, lead to some changes in policy, although they were minor. More significantly for the long-term, the protest spearheaded a debate in Israeli society – a debate that still continues to this day, regarding the political-ideological divide between market capitalism and social democracy and raising questions about the responsibility of the State to provide minimal standard of living for all its citizens, quality of life, and social rights. For first time in Israeli history, public debate posited a feminist socio-economic agenda against other socio-economic agendas.

Pursuant to the protest and the public debate, some of these very basic issues are currently being adjudicated in the Israeli High Court of Justice.

**Education and the Training of Women:**

The Ministry of Education has established a special unit dedicated to promotion of gender equality. The Ministry maintains an active website, attractive, and user-friendly website which not only provides information about the Ministry's programs and projects, but additional provides visitors with perspectives on the meaning of gender equality and women's empowerment. The language of the website and of directives issues by the Ministry of Education reveal a clear commitment to gender equality and provide definitive guidelines for teachers and all school officials.

The Minister of Education has repeatedly and explicitly declared that gender equality is not merely a "program" or a "project"; rather, it is a life-style. To these ends, all schools are instructed and expected to create and maintain an educational climate that is conducive to equality and mutual respect.

The Ministry of Education offers numerous InService Training programs for teachers to increase their awareness and skills to promote gender equality. Nation-wide programs such as “Teenage Girls Go For Change” empower high school students, while the school curriculum formally addresses issues such as gender, government, and politics. A special Ministry Committee continues to review all textbooks to eliminate gender stereotypes, etc. Most recently, the Ministry has instituted a matriculation program in gender studies.

The Ministry has made a particular commitment to promoting talented girls and women with exceptional aptitudes in math and science. These programs, some of which include significant awards and scholarships, especially at the college and university level, are based on concepts of gender equality, allowing each child to pursue his or her innate talents and inclinations, without deference to social pressures and inflexible gender expectations.

In Israel, sports come under the province of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Recent legislation passed by the Knesset mandates equal representation for men and women on all governing boards and committees that relate to sports; the legislation includes provisions for affirmative action. Most recently, Israel’s High Court of Justice ruled that municipalities must allocate greater proportions of the funding for sports for women’s groups, in order to compensate and close the gap.

#### **ISRAEL’S INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON GENDER ISSUES:**

MASHAV – the Center for International Cooperation of Israel – through its training institution the Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center (MCTC) – contributes to the advancement of women in the developing world by conducting international workshops and seminars in Israel and *in situ*. More than 11,000 women have been trained in socio-economic issues within their program.

Its aim is to share with other countries the knowledge, expertise and technologies which have assisted Israel on its own path to development. The Beijing Platform of Action raised many areas of concern with which MCTC has been dealing since 1961, namely: poverty, education, environment and development, the girl-child, health, economic participation, power-sharing and decision-taking.

In addition, MCTC holds biennial International Seminars and Symposia for Women Leaders. It understands the need to facilitate personal interaction and provide an opportunity for networking among concerned women, as they pursue the goals of sustainable development and empowering women in their own countries. Intended to address matters of current concern to women in the developing world and the industrialized countries, these seminars and symposia are an acknowledgement that holding decision-taking roles is a critical factor in the empowerment of women.

#### **Women and Health:**

As in so many areas of welfare, cutbacks in government spending have led to cutbacks in programs to promote women’s health, although basic preventative and maintenance services

(e.g., regular mammography) remain intact. At same time, numerous women's health groups and NGO's are promoting an increasing awareness of women's needs for holistic, comprehensive medical services; in many regions, over the past two years, the Ministry of Health, the Health Funds, and NGO's have established women's health centers to attend to women's particular health needs.

### **Violence Against Women:**

As we noted above, legislation to counter violence against women is one of the areas that Israeli feminists take pride in their most significant achievements. However, sentencing remains a difficult obstacle in our attempts to guarantee women's dignity, liberty, and freedom from violence. While the high maximal punishments provided for in the Penal Code represent a clear condemnation of sexual violence, the sentences imposed rarely constitute more than a fifth of the maximum in practice. As awareness of light sentencing increases, public disapproval, led mostly by women's organizations, have called for legislative restrictions on judges' discretion; these have already culminated in an amendment to the Penal Code that has instituted a minimum punishment for those convicted of rape, indecent acts, and sex crimes against family members. However, courts may still impose the minimum imprisonment in the form of a suspended sentence, without demanding any special and mitigating circumstances.

### **Women and Armed Conflict:**

There can be not doubt, that until our society lives in security and peace, Israel will continue to be forced to allocate large proportions of its income and resources towards military expenditures.

Yet, despite the ongoing threat to the State's existence, and to security and well-being, Israel is proud to have an active NGO peace movement that, among its other activities, actively demands involvement of more women informal and formal ("Track I") governmental peace processes and are persistent in their attempts to foster a culture of peace within Israel, especially among our youth.

Since Israel maintains universal conscription, we also relate this strategic content to issues facing women who serve in the army. In 2002, the Israeli Knesset passed legislation mandating equal opportunity and responsibility for men and women within Israel Defense Forces, and only bona fide occupational qualifications will be taken into account in assigning men and women to their positions in the armed services. This change is based on two important principles: the commitment of the armed forces, which play a central role in Israeli society, to equality; and the recognition of women's human capital and ability to contribute. This is particularly true in the areas of technology and scientifically-based responsibilities (which will also provide conscripts with important advantages when they are discharged into civilian life).

Chief military leaders have also reiterated their commitment to eliminating violence against women, including sexual harassment, as a means of promoting gender equality. Male and female conscripts alike are required to participate in mandatory sessions on gender equality; these sessions provide both information and opportunities for experiential values clarification regarding the legal, social, and psychological issues surrounding gender-based violence against

women. The Israel Defense Forces have also developed and instituted clear-cut mechanisms for reporting and dealing with violence against women within the armed forces.

### **Women in the Workforce and Women and the Economy:**

In late 2002, the State of Israel established the Council for the Advancement of Women in Science and Technology. This statutory Council is headed by a woman scientist and is composed of men and women who represent varied public and private scientific and academic areas.

Among its many other activities, the Council designated 2003 as “The Year for the Advancement of Women in Science and Academia”; as part of this program, the Council sponsored an extensive public awareness campaign, conducted surveys and information gathering projects, and assessed the status of women in these areas.

At the Council’s initiative, all of Israel’s universities and colleges have established committees to monitor women’s progress and have established a position of Advisor to the University President on Advancing the Status of Women.

A survey conducted by the Council revealed that in Israel, as in many Western countries, the scientific and technological professions reveal both horizontal and vertical segregation – that is, women are involved in certain, “pink-collar” professions, and even within these professions, they tend to be clustered into the lower positions in the hierarchy. This, despite the fact, on the average, girls do better than boys in high-level matriculation exams. A different survey revealed that the public largely supports women’s involvement and advancement in technology, science, and academia, and is in favor of equality-based scientific education in the school system.

The Council has initiated an extensive series of projects and programs to enable women and girls to advance in science and technology, including scholarships and incentives.

As we have noted in previous reports, Israel’s macro-economic and labor policies remain pro-natal and pro-family. Israel also has extensive family- and gender equality-friendly legislation, including equal rights to parental leave (after an initial period which can only be taken by the mother, to guarantee her health and well-being in the immediate post-partum period).

Legislation mandating affirmative action, especially in public tenders, public directories, etc., is being implemented with increasing success. Gender perspectives, especially those focused on gender-differences, are increasingly becoming part of the regular social and political discourse regarding.

Extensive legislation means few legal or formal limitations to women’s full integration into the economy. At this time, focus for gender equality: enforcement and encouraging judicial activism and changing social norms.

### **Women in Power and Decision-Making:**

Despite legislation, women remain seriously under-represented in almost all public, political and decision-making bodies. We believe that real, in-depth, long-term change will be affected by the educational system, and are confident that the coming generations of young women, who have

benefited from programs that encourage gender equality, will change this situation. In the interim, numerous NGO's, encouraged by the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, have established courses and "community schools" to provide women with the information they need to be assertive, proactive citizens and to participate in the political process, at whatever level.

### **Human Rights of Women:**

To our great consternation, Israel is a "destination country" for trafficking in women, especially from the Former Soviet Union Republics. . Israel has enacted a law prohibiting trafficking for prostitution in July 2000. Progress in the implementation of legislation and programs to deal with this affront has been achieved, among other things, through the activities of coalitions of women's organisations and human rights groups, backed up by cross-party coalitions of members of Knesset, which appointed a special inquiry committee on the subject of trafficking.

Currently, the Government of Israel is making serious and sustained efforts to eliminate severe forms of trafficking with respect to law enforcement, protection of victims, and prevention of trafficking. Israel has laws that prohibit trafficking, rape, kidnapping, blackmail, sexual and other abuse of minors, as well as an extensive law on organized crime enacted in 2003. In addition, the Israeli police vigorously investigate trafficking offenses, the Israeli Ministry of Justice aggressively prosecutes trafficking cases, and the Israeli courts handed down significant convictions with increasingly severe sentences being imposed on traffickers (of up to 15 years imprisonment). Protections for victims now include temporary visas for victims, medical care and most importantly – the establishment of a shelter for victims in February 2004 addressing all their special needs. Furthermore, the Israeli Government and its police actively work with other countries on these matters, participating in common investigation efforts and cooperating in enhancing investigation techniques through the sharing of information in international fora. In order to prevent trafficking the Government has begun to forge public information campaigns in Israel and abroad, and cooperates with foreign and local NGO's on these matters. In addition, a comprehensive government bill on trafficking, that would include a prohibition on enslavement, is in the final stages of drafting. Israeli feminist NGO's maintain contact with parallel organizations in the origin countries, in an attempt to help these women to economically and socially restructure their lives, so that they will not fall prey to trafficking in the future, despite the dire circumstances in their countries.

### **The Girl Child:**

Girls, like boys, are deeply affected by poverty, which in Israel, as in all Western countries, is on the rise, as are social gaps. Special, programs to provide psycho-social support to; However, as in so many areas, Israel's wide network of NGO's and voluntary groups has stepped in, providing numerous programs to aid women.

### **Religious Women:**

We also note with great satisfaction the emergence of a vibrant religious women's movement that strives towards inclusion of women into all areas and spheres of religious life and religious



community. This movement is distinctly bi-partisan and politically unaffiliated, and is yet another example of the move towards multidimensional and multicultural feminism within Israeli society.

### **Part III: Institutional Development**

Until recently, one of the main obstacles to full implementation of women's rights and the advancement of women's status in Israel was the lack of a central organization to connect governmental and nongovernmental actors in the area, to oversee their operation, compose overall plans and policies, and process complaints of women whose rights were violated or who suffered gender discrimination. As we have noted in our previous reports, the statutory Authority for the Advancement of Women has taken on this role.

The Knesset Committee of the Status of Women has also played a crucial role. This committee is the most important public forum where women's issues and concerns are examined, discussed, and handled. The committee's contribution to the advancement of women extends far beyond the formal level of parliament to the more informal level of women's alliance building and coordination of activities for furthering the common goals of gender equality and social change. The committee maintains close contacts with women's NGO's, receives input from women in senior positions in business and academia, and thus serves as a forum where women's voices are officially heard and mobilization around women's issues can be discussed.

While it is not part of the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, we also note the Local Authorities Law (Advisor on the Status of Women) which requires every municipality to appoint an advisor on women's status issues, whose role is to outline policy for the advancement of women within the purview of the local authority, while ensuring that necessary resources are provided to this end.

In addition, Israel has numerous public councils and committees (some of which we have noted above) that attend to specific women's needs and issues, together with hundreds of NGO's and other voluntary organizations. The Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women works closely with all these groups, thus providing vital synergy of "feminism from above" and "feminism from below".

#### **Part IV: Key Challenges and Constraints**

We noted above that we believe that knowledge is power. We are therefore committed to knowing more about the lives of all women in our country.

Unfortunately, there is only minimal statistical, sociological, or anthropological research available. There is a great need to produce, process and disseminate gender disaggregated data and information, examining women's lives empirically, assessing affects of policies, investigating the effects of legal reforms, etc. By knowing more, can effect more change.

Israeli women can be thankful that most issues that affect the basic quality of women's lives – life-expectancy, maternal and infant mortality, levels of literacy, marital age, access to health care, and so forth – enjoy a relatively high standard. However, as a highly developed country, committed to equality for all its citizens, Israeli women are not content to analyze the quality of their lives solely according to these parameters. As can be seen from this report, we are committed to examining more complex parameters, such as participation in public life, the extent to which gender perspectives have been mainstreamed into public discourse, etc.

There can be no doubt that Israeli women enjoy a wide, comprehensive, feminist-based system of legislation that responds to most of women's social and political needs. However, as is well-known, while a liberal legal framework may reflect a certain social ideology and vision, social behavior and real life are often quite different. Therefore, we are committed to effecting social change through attitude change, education, and values clarification in all frameworks.