

Sharon Geva

Women in the State of Israel:

The Early Years

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reviewed by Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui

Sharon Geva is what the French call *une intellectuelle engagée*, an intellectual who considers it her duty as a historian to take part in the making of a better and more just society. She has the courage and the talent to do research and write and/or speak about such “unimportant” things as feminism and human rights. She does so while remaining faithful to her discipline, so that she greatly contributes to our understanding of the gendered social order, in the past, the present and the future.

Accordingly, and not surprisingly, her first book, *To the Unknown Sister: Holocaust Heroines in Israeli Society*, based on her doctoral thesis in history and published in Hebrew in 2010, illustrates roles played by Jewish women in the Shoah. It describes, through the prism of women’s narratives, the way Israel coped in the 1950s–60s with the female survivors who arrived in the country. In the same spirit, Geva initiated and managed a project in which her students, instead of taking a test, wrote entries for the Hebrew-language Wikipedia on about eighty women who had not been accorded sufficient presence in the construction of Jewish Israeli identity. As one might expect, she also runs a feminist blog,<sup>1</sup> giving a name and a voice to some of the women silenced by official history; and she presents the stories of extraordinary women, too many of whom have been lost by time, in a weekly radio program aired by the Israel Broadcasting Authority

Like her humanist activism, her first book and the numerous important papers she has published in Hebrew and English during the last decade, Geva’s new book, *Women in the State of Israel: The Early Years*, published in Hebrew in 2020, reflects her feminist engagement. In this well written book, she exposes and deconstructs the gender order of the Jewish state during the 1950s and early 1960s by systematically scrutinizing women’s magazines and women’s sections in the leading Hebrew press. She also uses women’s memoirs and interviews, together with findings gleaned from the Israel State Archives, the Israel Defense Forces Archives and the Central Zionist Archives. From all these diligently and artfully combined sources, the

discourse about gender (in)equality in this early period emerges, together with the mechanisms that caused women to internalize and express the idea that their rights should be subordinated to state interests, thus becoming themselves complicit in entrenching gender boundaries.

The “early years” referred to by Geva are mostly “forgotten years” in the feminist research agenda, so that we know rather little about them. This is strange, for the “early years” are actually those in which the “equality bluff”<sup>2</sup>—the Israeli gender equality myth—was at its peak. Roland Barthes defines myths as taken-for-granted assumptions and “depoliticized speeches” that saturate everyday life and are spread in society, mainly via the media, everyday language, official documents, state practices and legislation. He claims that the (so well) concealed ideological and power-based nature of hegemonic myths makes them pivotal and effective in the legitimization of the social order.<sup>3</sup> Viewed through this prism, the gender equality myths of Israel’s early years appear as a key component of the state’s pioneering socialist-Zionist founding ethos. They depict the Israeli-Jewish woman as having played an equal part in the Zionist project of creating the foundations of what became the State of Israel<sup>4</sup> and as being present more than ever in the early years of statehood, epitomized by the figures of Israel’s “female pioneers” and kibbutz women, its female soldiers and, of course, leading political figure Golda Meir.<sup>5</sup> As Nitza Berkovitch suggests, “The leadership of the new state, presented themselves as following the route that they have started before the state was established, was aware of the ideological importance of the idea of sexual equality. It was not a mere commitment to the idea of equality, but a self-conscious portrayal of Israel as an example of a new and model society founded on principles of justice and equality.”<sup>6</sup>

Challenging this state of affairs, Geva analyzes the gendered past of Israeli society in that period—that is, at the lowest point in the history of Israeli feminism<sup>7</sup>—by taking apart the mechanisms by which the hegemonic gender equality myths were spread and perpetuated.

To make her point clear from the very beginning, the book’s cover reproduces a cartoon by the well known Israeli artist, cartoonist and illustrator Friedel Stern, showing a “desperate housewife,” alone, doing household chores on International Workers Day, with a crying child in her arms and another tugging at her dress for attention. Even on May 1, in the socialist-Zionist state, women were still imprisoned in their homes, the cartoon tells us, for their national mission was first and foremost marriage, childbearing and childrearing. These were the patriotic tasks the nascent state earmarked for women, to create the essential (Jewish) labor and military force needed to consolidate its existence.

After a short and well focused introduction, which, *inter alia*, points to the gap between myths and reality and emphasizes the importance of the Hebrew press as a historical source, the book is divided into three parts: “Woman and the State”; “Woman—The Mother”; and “Woman at Home.” Each part refers to some central aspects of the gendered “private–public” dichotomy, resting on what was then and still is the institution of “patriarchal motherhood”—what Adriana O’Reilly

has characterized as the assumption and expectation that “all women want to be mothers (essentialization), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalization), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealization).”<sup>8</sup>

With the patriarchal lens reinvented and reclaimed every day in women’s columns, as adduced by Geva, we read about women in politics; along with Golda Meir, we (re)discover Rachel Cohen Kagan, one of only two women (with Meir) to sign the Declaration of Independence, and elected to the First Knesset on a women’s list; Tova Sanhedrai, the first woman to represent the National Religious Party in the Knesset; Esther Raziel-Naor, one of the founders of the Herut (now the Likud) party, elected on its list to the Knesset; and Hannah Levin, the first woman mayor to be elected in Israel, in Rishon LeZion. We also meet Tehila Matmon, publisher of *Ha’ishah bamedinah* (The woman in the state), and the vibrant feminist journal she published between and 1949 and 1953; and Beba Idelson, leader of the Women Workers’ Movement (Tenu’at Hapo’alot—Histadrut) from 1930 to 1974 (!), and a Knesset Member for the Mapai (Labor) party from 1955 to 1965. We can then evaluate, based on the prevailing discourse in the women’s press, how patriarchal motherhood was elevated to the rank of women’s first national mission<sup>9</sup>—even for those women who did breach the gendered boundaries of the “public-private” dichotomy.

Whatever the issue Geva analyzes, the same celebration of patriarchal motherhood can be heard. Whether she is discussing women’s service in the Israeli Defense Force, bereaved mothers, women in the labor force or women at home, patriarchal motherhood is symbolically and practically ritualized to legitimize women’s exclusion from the public sphere and to create social hierarchies that construct women, *de facto*, as “the second sex.” Addressing the “Yemenite, Oriental and Balkan children affair,” in which young children taken to hospital from the immigrant transit camps disappeared without death certificates being issued, and may, as has been alleged, have been given to families of Ashkenazi (central European) background for adoption, Geva illustrates how this ode to patriarchal motherhood takes on an added racist dimension, as Ashkenazi patriarchal motherhood was lauded and Yemenite/Oriental/Mizrahi patriarchal motherhood dismissed.

That Geva’s historical research is based largely on newspaper items enables us to capture the hegemonic discursive space at that time, at the center of which, together with the gender equality myths, patriarchal motherhood is conspicuously articulated. This also enables us to understand how and why women leaders and “everyday women” accepted those patriarchal “maps of meaning”<sup>10</sup> and cooperated with different forms of their own exclusion. At the same time, we hear a few dissenting voices of women who refused to accept the rules of the game and protested it. Among them, are the voices of the women journalists who courageously wrote in *Ha’ishah bamedinah* and in the daily newspapers *Maariv*, *Haaretz* and *Davar*. Those women feminist knights of the pen and the pencil wrote, among other things, against the impact of religion on gender equality; on the disastrous conditions in which women gave birth in the Holy Land; on women’s right to abortion

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and on the structured gender inequality in the labor market. By virtue of this well documented, multilayered analysis, highlighting the multidimensional character of gender politics, we begin to complete the puzzle of women in the state of Israel in the early years.

A comparative historical perspective might have helped contextualize the analysis presented here, and a final chapter discussing gender equality myths, then and now, and the way patriarchal motherhood constructs and perpetuates them, could have brought a more contemporary resonance to these mythologies. However, to really complete the puzzle of Israeli women in the early years, I would suggest applying the methods Geva has used so well in this book to other, non-mainstream groups of that time, including Arab women, Haredi women, religious women and new immigrants. There is a need for *intellectuelles engagées* like Geva to dismantle oppressive myths, for the sake of constructing a common democratic future for women in Israeli society—and everywhere else in the world.

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Notes:

1. <http://sharon-geva.blogspot.com/p/english.html>.
2. Barbara Swirski and Marilyn Safir, *Calling the Equality Bluff: Women in Israel* (London: Pergamon Press, 1991).
3. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957).
4. Nitzza Berkovitch, "Motherhood as a National Mission: The Construction of Womanhood in the Legal Discourse in Israel," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20/5–6 (1997), p. 608. See also Deborah Bernstein (ed.), *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
5. Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui, "Women in Israel: The Social Construction of Citizenship as a Non-Issue," *Israel Social Science Research*, 12/1 (1997), pp. 1–30.
6. Berkovitch, "Motherhood as a National Mission" (above, note 4), *loc. cit.*
7. Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui, *Democracy and Feminism: Gender, Citizenship and Human Rights* (Hebrew; Ra'anana: The Open University, 2011), pp. 157–204.
8. Adriana O'Reilly, "We Need to Talk about Patriarchal Motherhood: Essentialization, Naturalization and Idealization in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*," *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 7/1 (2016), p. 65.
9. Berkovitch, "Motherhood" (above, note 4).
10. Barthes, *Mythologies* (above, note 3).