

Women in Israel

- Israeli law recognises equality among sexes with a consistent legislation guaranteeing equality in politics, work and punishing sexual harassment.



The Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights in Eretz Israel, feminist association in pre-state Israel

- Women's rights activism has started in the 1920s for guaranteeing equal participation of women in political and social life and has led to significant contribution of women in pre-state Israeli politics and military.



Golda Meir

- Women in Israel are very active in political life, with a percentage of representation in parliament comparable to the average of European states (15-18%). Israel also had a Prime Minister woman in the 1970s, Golda Meir.



- The compulsory military service allows women to serve in position of power and, increasingly over the last years, in combatant units. The army is considered a laboratory of equality where women in power influence the role of women in society.



- The international coalition of “agunot”, women waiting for decree of divorce from uncooperative husbands.
- Women’s rights are considerably curtailed in religious courts, which have jurisdiction on family law matters. Religious women’s rights organisations are fighting for women representation in religious council and for women’s rights in religious courts.
 - Sexual harassment is punished by the law. The Katzav affair, former President of Israel convicted and jailed for rape, has bolstered up women’s activism against sexual abuse. Campaigns against sexual harassment are now widespread for raising awareness on women’s rights.
 - Women belonging to minorities suffer from discrimination of traditional and patriarchal social constructs.



Adina Bar-Shalom, haredi activist

- Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) women, who bear the burden of supporting the family, have been subject over the last twenty years to a growing radicalisation of patriarchal extremism, including the imposition of severely modest clothing, the gender separation on buses and public spaces, and exclusion from public life. Haredi women's activism contest this trend, and the intervention of the Supreme Court of Israel has in several occasions stopped extremist practices, including gender separation in buses.
- Arab women, especially Muslim, suffer from repressive practices that keep them at the margins of social life. Honour killings are widespread in Arab society. Among the Bedouins polygamy is secretly practiced, although outlawed. Higher education is often a way to gain independence, postponing early marriages and gaining freedom to go out of the home.
- Arab women are also active in politics, almost exclusively in Arab parties openly hostile to Israel and the Zionist narrative.
- IC has decided to interview two activists for women rights. Naomi Ragen, writer, journalist and Jewish Orthodox, leading the fight against gender separation on buses. Nadia Hilo, former Member of Knesset for the Labour Party, leader in women's rights and Arab minority rights.

Interview with Nadia Hilo



Former MK, researcher at Institute of National Security Studies, Senior Lecturer in Sapir College and Consultant.

How would you describe the status of women in Israel?

When one talks about women in Israel, one has to consider their communal identity – Jewish, religious, secular, Arab, Christian, Muslim, Druze or Bedouin – because their cultural and social background significantly impacts their status.

In general, I am not satisfied with the current situation. I think there is not yet real equality between men and women, either in employment or in education.

Where do you see inequality?

The situation is very complex. If you look at employment, public or private, there is no equality in salary. Even in education there is no equality: women are the majority of BA students, but the number of female students in MA courses decreases significantly, even more among PhD students and then you see that the large majority of lectures are men. Furthermore, in politics women are not enough represented.

Why?

I believe that first and foremost the reason lies in the way children are educated. Secondly, I believe it is a question of social behaviour that strengthens inequality. For instance, a child in school sees that most of the teachers are women, but then the principle is a man. The same can be said for other contexts. In this way, a society consolidates the idea that positions of power and authority are a man's job. Finally, I believe it is a problem of social construction: the entire social system does not give the same opportunities to women.

Israel though has a consistent legislation on equality.

We have a lot of laws guaranteeing equality, but it is not enough. What we need is radical change in the employment world. In the end, it is women who bear children and take care of them when they are born. Therefore, we need policies that allow women to work from home – policies that introduce more flexibility in work. The whole educational system and labour market is not built to let women work, wherefrom also inequalities in salary.

You said there is a difference between Christian and Muslim women.

There are differences between Muslim and Christians in general, regarding education and employment and cultural differences in daily life. Muslims are more traditional and there is a growing phenomenon of going back to religion and tradition. The greatest difference is in birth rate: Muslim birth rate is higher. Cultural features are also very important: in a patriarchal society men are in a position of power, and this affects the life of women.

Arab women suffer of a triple discrimination: as women, as Arab citizens (minority), and as part of Arab society that is patriarchal. This has significant consequences on their status, because they are the weakest group in Israeli society, more than Jewish women and more than Arab men. Therefore, when I say that legislation is fundamental, I mean that the law should impose the presence of women. I say that by law at least 40% of parliamentarians should be women and the same for legislative bodies in local authorities. This will make people accept the idea that women have to be in positions of power, and over the years such laws will not be necessary any more, as it happens in Scandinavian countries.

Local authorities are indeed important, what would women's participation mean?

When you talk about local governance, I mean education, health and other local services. These are matters that women know well for their own experience in daily life, and their contribution could be substantial, but they are marginalized by the tradition.

In what sense?

One needs to understand that politics in Arab local authorities is characterised by Arab traditional culture, whereby the hamulas, tribes or large families, dominate local politics and not parties. The hamulas decide who will be elected. Once the hamulas had considerable economic power and influenced the daily life of their members – they were the major social institution in Arab traditional society. The hamulas, as social institutions, do not exist any more. Yet, they still exert considerable influence in local politics: in every Arab village, the hamulas determine the results of the elections, while national politics and parties do not have influence. It is part of a public ego: they would appoint someone in a certain position not because of his skills or experience, but just because he belongs to a certain family. In this sense, it is difficult to see how women can enter local politics and be active in local governance. However, the last elections showed that Arabic women for the first time entered local politics as leaders of electoral lists. In Kfar Kasseem and Sakhnin, there were two lists leaded by women, and many women participated in other villages. Nonetheless, few of them were elected.

But there are local elections and local electoral campaigns with parties.

Yes, but local politics in Arab villages follow the rules of the traditional society. Therefore, there are parties, but they are subject to the social norms defined by the traditional hamula that dominates elections and local governance. It is an impenetrable system.

But you said that there were cases of women at the top of Arab parties lists.

If one considers the specific cases, there is still a long way to walk, and therefore I claim that imposing the presence of women, as an affirmative action, is an effective measure to make women part of local and national politics. But if one considers the historical evolution, then one can clearly say that it is a success. The very fact that women are in politics and participate in election, it means that their presence is acknowledged, that the public already accepts women in party lists and in elections. And this is already a great accomplishment, even though the results are unsatisfactory.

You believe things are changing?

In my opinion there are clear signs of remarkable changes and this process will lead to more radical modification of society. In this respect, I am convinced that the new media are playing a significant role, and it serves the cause of women and of Arab women in particular.

The political use of new media is indeed a remarkable phenomenon. How do Arab women benefit from new media?

There are studies that indicate how the use of new media in the Arab communities is high than in the Jewish. Additionally, women are dominant in networks, blogs and online outlets.

Why?

First of all, women's freedom is limited and less exposed to social life: they are expected to stay home, while men are freer experience social life and are expected to go out and earn a living. For this reason you have more women than men in high schools, because it is a way for them to enjoy liberty and often it is the only option they have. Likewise, through the new media, women can express themselves freely and Internet is a powerful means to overcome the social barriers that keep them at the margins of society.

Women are becoming activists through the Internet?

Women are making their voice heard and there are cases in which they have become even leaders. For example, it was a Bedouin woman who led the protests against the resettlement of Bedouins in the South of Israel. And she initiated the campaigns through social networks. It means that new media are empowering women in traditional societies.

How do you see future?

The process is slow and the road toward equality is long. But new media cannot be stopped and women are dominant in bringing processes of change. Additionally, I believe that education remains the first approach for social and economic change. In this respect, higher education is fundamental and there are a lot of women holding BAs MAs and PhDs, but the potential is largely unexploited. So I believe that there are skills, talent and aspirations are there; the problem is to implement it. Things are slowly improving even in the labour market, but the general social obstacles, flexibility in employment and other practical arrangements such as transportation, housing and other flaws in social services, affect much more the Arab community.

Let me ask you about your work. Can you talk about your activity as a Member of Knesset?

I have always been committed to social change and I have dedicated my work to social rights of children and women in particular. My driving principles are social justice and equality of Arab minority. I started as a social worker and local leader in my community in Yafo and I became a Member of Knesset. I presented about 80 law bills and 11 of them were passed and adopted as laws. One law that I proposed and passed established the Academy for Arabic Language, for the study and dissemination of the Arabic language and literature. Another law regards the sexual exploitation of children, specifically in cyber sex and pedo-pornography. Together with many other MKs from different parties, including Sheli Yachimovitch of the Labour Party and Gideon Saar of the Likud, we presented a law bill for the extension of birth permit to 14 weeks, which eventually passed. Many law bills that I submitted did not eventually pass. I proposed some laws for introducing affirmative

action arrangements for women, quota for women in local authorities bodies, incentives to parties for appointing women to leadership.

You were elected as a member of the Labour party. Why not an Arab party?

I have always been into politics, since I was young a young activist and social worker in Jaffa. At that time I was not in party politics, but local politics. I recall my first activities for obtaining public housing for young couples and kindergartens. I started alone with other friends and colleagues, and after a few years there was a network of nurseries! I represented then social workers in social and professional forums. I have always welcomed challenges and I have often been the first to bring social change in many sectors.

And how did you get into party politics?

It was in 1998 when the first electoral list from Jaffa participated in the Tel Aviv municipal elections and was linked to the Meretz Party (socialist). It was an Arab-Jewish list, which eventually won two seats in the municipal council. I was offered to participate in the elections, but that would mean I should leave my public job and if elected, the post was without salary. My husband and I were then a young couple and I did not want to leave my job. It was then with the Oslo process and the peace treaty that I decided to get into national politics as member of the Labour party, whose policies and views I shared. And I decided to do so as a member of a national party for a seat in the parliament and not for the seat reserved for Arabs within a party list. Everybody thought I was crazy and kept telling me: "you are crazy! You have no chance! It's impossible". And I obstinately stick to my decision to participate in elections as an equal among equals, like Rabin and Dalia Itzik and others. Others would patronizingly tell me "you show courage": I took it as a challenge. I wanted to be like everyone else, to undergo the same process. And this shows Arab women that they can; it shows Jewish Israelis that I am equal to them. It was not easy, but I decided not to compromise to my idea that equality is absolute. And there you go, I was elected in the 15th Knesset among other MKs!

How do you see integration of minorities?

Israel is missing a great opportunity. I believe that beyond security there is another great challenge, which is the integration of the Arab community, the development of the Arab sector, and in my view the state fails to address the question in the right way. Socio-economic gaps are consistent, in every field. But the problem is that the endurance of the Arab minority is dramatically diminishing. My parents were born before the state was founded in 1948, and they had a remissive attitude toward institutions; they were not involved in politics. I belong to the generation born after 1948 and we are surely active in politics, but we are moderate. I remember my father warning me when I enrolled in Tel Aviv University not to approach any student organization, to distance myself from political activism, out of suspicion toward institutions. But if I have to look at our young generation, then I have to say that they are not ready to compromise on anything regarding equality. They were born in a democratic environment; they know what democracy is and they live it and therefore they are not ready to accept any unequal status. They are an Israeli generation with everything that this implies. There are also external factors that concur to this situation: the peace with Palestinians, the lack of a clear policy for equal treatment of the Arab population. And there is a growing radicalization of certain movements against Arabs. Consider how many price-tag events there have been in the past months: is the police really doing something? Why do the police always catch someone that vandalizes the flag and never catches someone that vandalizes an Arab house? And vandalism is

increasingly directed against holy places, which is a sensitive issue. If this will continue, I do not know what it will be.

Still, you are optimistic?

I am optimistic, sometimes I do not know why, but it is the way I am. Maybe it is also the surrounding environment that made me optimistic in order to survive and to struggle for change. The radicalised always shout louder than other people. We need new laws and new economic policies, for guaranteeing effectively equal opportunities to women and for integrating the Arab sector. This integration will just improve the economy and the social fabric of the State of Israel. And this is not less important than peace!

Interview with Naomi Ragen

Writer and journalist



Naomi Ragen, you are a writer, a journalist and also an activist for women's rights. How did you begin your social activity?

Last month, in the synagogue, a girl approached me and told me that, as a law student, she was studying one case that has got my name on it: Naomi Ragen v. Misnistry of Transportation and Egged Bus Company. It was a very important ruling that the High Court of Justice gave in 2011 after four years of litigation. It was not my intention to go to court. I was on my way home from the centre of Jerusalem; I got on an empty bus, line n. 40, and sat in a single seat – going through haredi (ultra-Orthodox) neighbourhoods, I did want haredi men to feel uncomfortable having to sit near a woman – as a religious woman, I respect their traditions, but I did not know that my sensitivity was not going to be rewarded! Someone got on the bus, turned around and told me: “you cannot sit here, you have to sit on the back of the bus”. I looked at him disappointed and replied: “Pardon?! This is a public bus and I am not bothering anyone. Thank you, but I sit wherever I want”. I did not realise then that he was actually trying to help me, because other people getting on the bus were not as polite! A group of passengers came over to me and aggressively told me I should sit on the back; there was among them this fat haredi man hanging over me and sweating all over me he shouted “go and sit on the back of the bus”. I did not know there were particular rules to follow on that bus and in that moment I could not let it go. I felt like Rosa Parks struggling for blacks on buses in the United States. “It is a public bus and I sit wherever I want”, I replied vigorously. I was then verbally assaulted and I was afraid they would attack me – and I am still convinced they did not just because they are prevented from touching a woman who is not their wife or strict relative. I refused to move, remained in my place and, calling him tzadik, in front of everyone, I asked him to show me where the halakhah, the Jewish law, forbids a woman to sit among men on a bus, and to live me alone until then.

I got off the bus, in tears. The first thing I did was calling the Egged company inquiring if there were particular rules on specific lines about sits reserved for women. The officer

denied there were such rules, telling me it was voluntary. I was not satisfied with his answer and wrote a letter of protest. I received a formal letter of response that did not touch on the issue I raised. I then wrote an article for the Jerusalem Post about my experience and about the growingly alarming phenomenon of gender separation on certain buses. After some time, I got a phone call from the legal department of the Centre for Religious Pluralism, offering me to join a suit they wanted to file against the Ministry of Transportation and the Egged Company together with other women who had similar experiences.

It came out that the Egged Company had an agreement with haredi communities on how drivers should behave on lines in which the gender separation was imposed. We try to negotiate with the Ministry of Transportation, but he actually sided with the haredi, who were then in the government coalition. A governmental committee was appointed, proposing to outlaw the gender segregation practice, but the Ministry refused to implement its directives, and we then brought the case to the Supreme Court, which ruled in our favour! There was also a religious judge who in the sentence wrote about a famous rabbi who, seeing a woman getting on the bus, asked his fellow passenger who would give up his seat for her. Now all buses in Jerusalem have signs warning that passengers can choose the seat that they want, except for places reserved to disabled and pregnant women, and any interference may be punished by law. This decision has limited the spreading of religious fanaticism and of haredi interpretation of Jewish law that even religious Jews do not share.

In your books you write about the haredi world, and for this you have been criticized, why?

When I first started writing about the haredi world, I actually started a new literary genre; nobody had written before of the the Jewish ultra-Orthodox society. An Israeli literary agent even refused to translate my books in Hebrew – I write in English, my mother tongue – because I was told nobody is interested in reading about the haredi women in Israel. Then the Israeli publishing house Keter offered me to publish my second book, “Sotah”, which has been a best seller for 93 weeks! Many secular Israelis wrote me sympathetic letters thanking me for introducing them to the haredi world, a society toward which secular Israelis tend to feel hostile.

And how did the haredi public react?

Haredi readers criticized me; they found outrageous that I wrote about the haredi society: they felt that I somehow violated their privacy. Anything you write about them, positive or negative, is interpreted as a violation of their private world. As a writer, I believe instead that you should write about anything you want. I have never accepted the idea that the haredi society is off limits and I also think that my books are balanced, showing positive and negative aspects equally. Haredi people are not used to read realist literature; they have their newspapers, their literature, which goes through censorship that allows only positive things go through. There is no criticism, and how can you be a better person if there is no light shining on your society? In this sense, I believe that literature has also to serve as social critique, and that is why I wrote that book, to speak of positive things and of those that need to be corrected.

Secular men accuse the haredi society of a progressive radicalization of social behaviors, which often have no root in Jewish law. What are the causes of this growing fanaticism?

It is a question I have often thought about. I think first of all that the connection of religion to politics in Israel has led to those vying for political power in the haredi world to go to extremes in order to find favour within their society in the belief that the more extreme you are, the more accepted you are as formally committed to your religion. Secondly, I believe that the rise of Islamic extremism and shari'a law has influenced extremists in the Jewish religion to take equally extreme stances on women: it is a patriarchy showing another patriarchy how far you can go and push your power as a man to control women's lives. Also, the rise of education of women in the haredi world has created a situation in which women are educated in secular fields and are out in the world working, while men are studying in the yeshiva. I believe that this has brought to a lot of women looking down on their husbands, because they are supporting the family, and to counter this the environment has become extreme in order to put women in their place out of fear that the man may lose his superior stance. So first women cannot take a seat next to a man, then they cannot walk on the same sidewalk as a man, and they are told what they can wear. For instance, there are campaigns to outlaw wigs, which have been acceptable in the Ashkenazi haredi world, because they say it is hard to distinguish a wig from real hair. They have been throwing bleach on women who they consider are not appropriately addressed. In the end, this is an attempt to show that men are in power, a message to women that although they work and support the family, they will never be in control. Women supporting the family while men are studying is a traditional division of roles in the haredi world which was common even in Europe in the last century – there is also a part of a Shabbat prayer, eshet hail, which says “and she sells it out of profit”, showing that the appropriate role of a virtuous woman is to support the family while men have always been respected in their role as Torah scholars. But what is happening is that women do not passively accept the role that is imposed on them, and there is the idea that a man should know something about the world.

You said that this is a haredi interpretation of women's role. As a religious Jewish woman, what is the role of the woman in Jewish society?

Some years ago, I was studying the first book of the Torah, the Genesis: after the sin, G-d said to Adam “by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food” and cursed Eve “your husband will rule over you”. I was taught that this was a curse and when the Messiah will come there will be equality between sexes, because the idea of men ruling over women is a curse to be corrected in Messianic days. So my attitude always was that men and women were created equal, and that G-d created a man-woman creature that at a certain point He divided them into a woman and man. There are certain religious responsibilities that a woman is not obligated to perform because they are time-bound. I always accepted that because as a mother of four children you cannot expect a woman to say her prayers by nine-ten exactly if she is taking care of a baby that has been up all night. You cannot expect a woman that takes care of children to be involved in anything that obligates her time, and I think this is a very wise on the part of the rabbis that exempted women from time-bound Jewish obligations. I never took as a sign of women's inferiority that a man has more religious obligations than women. There is a movement among Orthodox women to accept many of these responsibilities – as the Women of the Wall Movement – for instance participating equally in the synagogue services, reading the Torah, putting on prayer shawls, covering their heads with kippa. I am of the old school and feel that I do not need any of these obligations. I have enough religious obligations and I am not looking for more!

There is a morning prayer that men say in which they thank G-d for not making them women, and this does offend me. The woman's alternative to this prayer is "Thank G-d for making me who I am", and some years ago I decided that I was going to change this and I now say "Thank you G-d for making me a woman, for making me who I am". And this is something that I feel as a necessary corrective to a traditional prayer that I find offensive to women. I indeed have got complaints, but I think that they are minor and I can solve them on my own. It is true that when I have a religious question I ask my husband, because he has studied more years than I have, and I think he knows better than I do. In terms of rituals and religious law, my husband takes decision. This does not make me feel inferior; I am just happy I have somebody to ask and that can give me answers.

However, I believe it is important for women to learn Talmud, and I think it is very important for women to be involved in interpreting religious law when it comes to divorce and it comes to women's rights as far as her ability to remarry. I am convinced there needs to be a tremendous upheaval in the way Jewish law is practiced as far as divorce is concerned. Currently, it is not practiced in the spirit of the law and is completely prejudicial to women and needs to be changed. There are women now learning Talmud and are lawyers in rabbinical courts and their presence has been so far helpful in changing the law.

Indeed, women's rights are not always respected in religious courts. Still, Israel is a democratic, liberal and Jewish state. What is the status of women in Israeli society?

I believe there is a poisonous connection between politics and religion in Israel, and this is the worst thing that has happened to the Jewish religion in thousands of years. You have rabbis been chosen not for their erudition, but for their political connections and this is unacceptable. You also have a situation where you have an official politically appointed Chief Rabbinate and a politically appointed rabbinical court. While several matters of family law are in the hands of rabbinical courts, you understand that this has led to a terrible and poisonous situation in which many of the rabbinical judges, politically appointed, are among the most reactionary and ignorant of this country and they are sitting on courts that decide on marriage and divorce of Jewish couples. Sometimes you feel little difference from a court in Iran.

Consider for instance divorce. According to Jewish law a divorce has to be freely given, but you may have the case of a man found guilty of adultery who does not want to give a divorce to his wife. But 500 years ago the Jewish Sage Maimonides said that if a man does not want to give his wife a divorce freely then you beat him until he does. Israeli law allows to put men in jail if the rabbinical court finds that the marriage has to be dissolved and the man does not want to act accordingly. But almost no rabbinical court uses these powers, except one case some time ago in Haifa. Women who do not have a bill of divorcement cannot re-marry, and the children she may have are considered mamzerim, bastards, unable to marry within the Jewish people. They are called agunoth

So I believe that rights of women in Israel have been curtailed by the religious political access which gives power to rabbinical courts that they do not deserve to have and certainly should not be centralized in a rabbinical court which is politically appointed. These appointments are political; they have nothing to do with religion and nevertheless they control private lives of Israeli citizens to a terrible degree.

You described a critical situation for women in Israel. But Israel is also a democracy and you share this opinion.

What I described is a situation that exists side by side with Israel the democracy, where nonetheless you do not find complete equality between men and women. We have women

in politics; we also had a Prime Minister woman, Golda Meir. But if you compare the situation to other Western countries, Israel falls behind.

Like what countries?

Norway, Sweden, with which even the United States cannot compete either. But I believe in the United States there is a better situation for women than in Israel. There is still a very old-fashioned idea that a woman should be home taking care of the children, even if hi-tech is open to women, and even if women are at the head of companies. I recall being asked in a job interview if I had children and how I intended to manage my work and my private life: in the US you could have sued someone for such a question. As far as sexual discrimination is concerned, Israel has not yet reached the level of the U.S. But we are making progress.

What are the reasons of this progress?

I believe it is the fact that women serve in the army. Women serve alongside men and are given positions of power – the commanding officer of my young son was a woman. And the army is a place of equality where you do have women who have to serve in the army and that forces women to be in places of responsibility. This is something you do not see in other countries. So in the long term it is a good scenario.

You talked about women's activism, which is typical of Israel.

I agree, but when women become activists they do not concentrate on women's rights. There was this movement to get soldiers out of Lebanon called the "Four Mothers Movement" and this was started by four women who wanted their sons to get out of Lebanon, so it had nothing to do with women's rights. The question is that in Israel you have so many other issues which are life or death issues: in front of your children in the army, bombs falling on your head and house, terrorism, women's rights are not the priority.

They are not the priority but they are not disregarded either.

I will make an example. Israel is a country where the president of the state was accused of sexual harassment. Not only this matter was not swept under the carpet, but he was brought to trial, convicted and jailed. This shows that things are changing in this country. The old boy school where you can get away with those things is not longer effective. Sexual harassment has become much more prominent; people now put themselves on the line, go to court to fight for their rights. It was a tremendous victory for women

Often, Israeli and international activists for human rights portray Israel as a bad place for women. What do you think?

It is wrong to say that Israel is not a good place for women. I made aliyah from the United States; I have two daughters and six granddaughters. All of them were brought up in Israel and enjoy equal education and were active in youth organisations where boys and girls participate equally and all of them were brought up with the idea that they can do anything that they want and that they can participate as equal members of a democratic society. The fact that women participate in political organisations to the Right and to the Left is just another proof that women have equality and are respected. Women are able to pursue whatever social or political agenda they have. Israel is a wonderful place for any woman to live because you can make inroads in so different areas because the population is young and open to change. In older societies it is not so much the case. When you coming to Israel you are actually building a new country. Look at me: I went to court against segregated buses and every time I get on a bus I see a sign on the bus it is illegal to

harass women on buses. I get an enormous personal satisfaction from that, and who am I? A writer, not a politician, but through Israeli organisations, I was able to bring about this change now even studied in law schools. It is a lesson for all women: Israel is a young, vibrant, democratic country where you can make positive change even if you are the most ordinary person and you can see in your life time the effect of your activism.

Even though there are not many women in positions of power, would you define Israel a democracy?

Yes, absolutely. I believe Israel deserves to rank high as any other democracy, also because it is surrounded by patriarchal, religion-driven countries. It is easy to be a democracy if you are Sweden surrounded by Denmark and Norway. But if you are surrounded by countries that do not recognise any freedom whatsoever and you have to protect the lives of your citizens, it is remarkable that you are able to dedicate so much time and energy to develop a vibrant democracy!

Do you have a message to women in the world?

There was a conference organised by the European Union on “religion and domestic violence” and I was invited to participate as the representative of Israel. I met women from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and every European nation. We all sat around a table and discussed about our lives in our countries and what needed to change for women to have better lives. We found that there were so many things we had in common. First of all, the problems that women face in Saudi Arabia or Jordan, for instance, are on a much higher level than women face in Israel. The representative of Jordan talked about honour killings and presented a law bill to lengthen the sentence of men convicted for murdering their daughters or wives. The representative of Saudi Arabia talked of how men get automatically child custody in case of divorce. We learnt that there are situations in which women should override their political divides, because in every country of the world women suffer from inequality, domestic abuse, lack of mobility. And we have so much more to gain by uniting than allowing political considerations to tear us apart. That meeting was illuminating: women gathered from all over the world to talk about their real problems and not the man-made problems of politics that can interfere with any progress that we can make. I still am in touch with some of them, even coming from countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel.

Still the UN Commission for Women’s Rights does not seem interested in an apolitical commonality of women and keeps condemning Israel systematically.

At that meeting it was clear that Israel has the least problems. Young girls given in marriage to old men in the Arab world, feminine genital mutilations in Africa, honor killings, limitation of women’s freedoms and rights without a male tutor in Islamic countries... The UN should have a more active role in contesting these offences, which affect the lives of millions of women in the world instead of concentrating on a democracy like Israel, which is striving for change and equality between the sexes. It is a disgrace for the UN and they should be ashamed.