

# The Undermined Status of Women as a National Security Challenge

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Over the past seven months, Israel's current government has undermined the status of women through legislation, coalition decisions, and inflammatory public discourse fueled by controversial statements from senior officials. Not only is this disturbing from a moral standpoint, but it also has potential national security implications for Israel.

## Government Actions Undermining the Status and Rights of Women in Israel

After years of a noticeable increase in the number of women holding positions in the Knesset, government, and senior offices in Israel, peaking during the Bennett-Lapid government, the current government is marked by a decline in female representation and exclusion from crucial policymaking positions. When women are under-represented and not included in the decision-making process, crucial matters concerning women's progress are generally disregarded, and their rights compromised.

The dearth of women's representation is clearly reflected in the numbers: the current government comprises 26 male and 6 female ministers, with only 2 out of 32 directors general being women. In the Knesset, there are 29 female members and 91 male members. The security-political cabinet has one female minister and 9 male ministers, while the Ministerial Committee on Legislative Matters has 2 female members and 9 male members. Women have also been displaced from senior public office positions.

Under-representation of women existed before this government, but recent years saw progress through official policies promoting gender equality. However, the current coalition includes parties that adhere to religious worldviews and advocate male superiority, which necessarily negates the idea of gender equality. The two ultra-Orthodox parties in the coalition exclude women altogether. Other parties have very few women, some of whom endorse anti-feminist views. It appears, that in the present government, gender equality is not only not on the agenda, but in fact is perceived as undesirable.

This is illustrated by the decision to abandon the campaign aimed at motivating women to participate in the upcoming local elections. This move was supported by none other than the Minister for the Advancement of the Status of Women, May Golan, who also prompted the resignation of the head of the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, Ayelet Razin Bet-Or, after only a year and a half in this position. Moreover, the government has approved a bill to dismantle this independent Authority and replace it with a political body wholly subordinate to the Minister. The objectives of the Authority, mainly the prevention of violence against women, coordination between bodies engaged in promoting the status of women in Israel, and advancing education, legislation, and enforcement in these areas, were erased from the bill, which failed to define the role of the new political body to be established.

The potential for harm to women's rights can also be seen in a range of other moves, including: the removal of the initiative to extend paternity leave by two weeks; the decision by the Civil Service Commission to use exclusively masculine language on all official forms, announcements, and documents; the proposal to amend the law against discrimination, allowing discrimination in the provision of services and the sale of products for reasons of religious faith, thus permitting discrimination against the LGBT community, Arabs, and women (for example, if considered to be dressed immodestly); the proposal, which is currently frozen, to ban mixed prayers at the Western Wall, and to impose penalties for immodest dress; and the proposal to extend the powers of the rabbinical courts.

Another concern for women's rights derives from the moves to promote gender segregation in public spaces, such as national parks and nature reserves. In addition, the bill proposed by MK Simcha Rothman, which seeks to make city and neighborhood rabbis subordinate to the sole authority of the Chief Rabbinate, is expected to lead to the exclusion of women from public ceremonies and prayers. The current trend raises fears of further separation that could be manifested, for example, by prohibiting women from singing or speaking at official events. This attitude is already seeping into the general public, resulting in a noticeable increase in discriminatory incidents, such as a refusal to allow women to board buses, sometimes simply for being women, and in some cases on account of "immodest dress."

The government has failed to support women even on an issue that should enjoy national consensus, namely the prevention of violence against women. For example, the law on issuing orders to place electronic monitors on violent men, submitted by Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, imposes stricter conditions compared to the conditions in the previously approved bill, while ignoring recommendations made by professional bodies. At the same time, the Minister is promoting a bill that eases the conditions for obtaining a license to carry a firearm, disregarding warnings about the threat to women's personal safety. Meanwhile, a bill on the prevention of economic violence against women by their spouses, which previously passed its first reading, has been blocked by the government.

Furthermore, the proposed judicial overhaul, aimed at weakening the power of the courts, has significant implications for the status of women in Israel. Over the years the courts have played a crucial role in ensuring gender equality, by issuing important rulings such as forcing the IDF to open the pilots' course to women, pronouncing that women are granted the right to be appointed to religious councils and to serve as advocates in rabbinical courts, and prohibiting gender segregation in cemeteries and in public spaces. The recent passage of [the law canceling the reasonableness standard](#) and other elements of the planned overhaul could leave women

in Israel defenseless against a government that seeks unlimited power and does not believe in gender equality.

Thus, in a series of moves, the government has effectively set back the status of women in Israel by several decades. Unfortunately, this appears to be just the beginning.

### Undermining Women's Rights and the Risk to National Security

Actions taken by the government that negatively affect women's rights can have far-reaching consequences for Israeli society, including its political stability, economic growth, and national security.

In terms of values, democracy aims to ensure equality and eliminate discrimination. Consequently, gender equality stands as a fundamental principle within a democratic regime. Unrestricted participation of women in the public sphere is crucial in establishing their equal standing as citizens and safeguarding their rights. An assault on women's rights, such as excluding them from public spaces, serves as a clear indicator of a nation's democratic decline, as demonstrated in countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland, where attacks on the democratic system have coincided with the erosion of women's rights.

However, gender equality is not only just, but also essential to the success of a state. [Studies show](#) a direct link between gender equality, economic growth, and political stability. The status of women reflects a country's level of advancement, as there is a positive correlation between the standard of living in a country and the level of equality for women. Countries where women are empowered are more secure and more prosperous, and a country's prosperity has a direct impact on its national security. An economically stable country can invest more in security. In a country such as Israel, which faces continuous external threats, possible cuts in the security budget amount to a concrete threat to national security.

In practical terms, when women are excluded from the public sphere, the government denies itself an important resource – the high-quality human

capital of women's enormous potential in terms of knowledge, ability, and motivation. Specifically, keeping women out of central positions in security organizations will harm the performance of these organizations. Furthermore, research shows that the integration of women into decision-making processes improves the quality of decisions.

Moreover, a decline in gender equality could eventually lead to a significant exodus of strong segments of the population. Recently, more and more Israelis have expressed an intention to leave the country if it loses its liberal character. Women and families with daughters are especially worried. This is understandable. While life in a non-liberal country could be challenging for liberal men, for liberal women it would be intolerable. Women who view themselves as equal to men will not be prepared to live in a country where they are regarded as second-class citizens, and naturally, women who leave will take their families with them.

The phenomenon of brain drain poses a [real danger](#) that could cause unprecedented damage to the country. The departure of professionals who form the backbone of Israel's economy, business, academia, and culture will have devastating effects on the economy, and negative implications for the country's stability and national security. Even if only [several tens of thousands](#) relocate, it will have severe consequences for the entire country. It will diminish Israel's human capital, resulting in a decrease in the return on investment made toward education, training, and higher education, as well as a decline in tax revenue. It will also drastically impair the country's economic and technological development, which is essential to maintain its strength. One can only imagine what will happen if there is a mass exodus of female doctors, engineers, and scientists, together with their partners, who are often part of the same world. If the wave of departures spreads to the senior ranks of the security services and public sector, the outcome will be a direct threat to national security. This is not a theoretical scenario. It is exactly what happened in countries where democratic and liberal values were eroded – such as Argentina, Lebanon, Turkey, Russia, Hungary, and Poland.

Above all, the decline in gender equality is a mortal blow to social cohesion and national resilience, two crucial components of national security. Liberal women feel threatened by people now sitting in the government. Unless these fears are overcome, it will be impossible to embark on processes of restoring social unity.

The Prime Minister and other members of the coalition, at least those who themselves hold liberal views, must take decisive action to stop the undermining of gender equality in Israel – if not for the sake of democratic values and social unity, then for the sake of national security.

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