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Womenis and Gender Studies and Feminist Theories, Tel Aviv
University

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THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

11th Annual Conference on Women's and Gender Studies
and Feminist Theories, Tel Aviv University

reviewed by Hanita Brand

The Eleventh Annual Conference on Women's and Gender Studies and Feminist Theories, held in February 2003 at Tel Aviv University, had as its topic "The Feminization of Poverty." True to feminist insistence on the connection between academic research and social activism, the participants consisted of academics and activists alike, women and men from across disciplines and social strata, who gathered for three days in 28 sessions and panels to discuss, debate, and testify about poverty and women in Israel and the world over. The organizing committee, headed by Dafna Lemish, billed the conference as "a process of shared thinking that might contribute toward social change."

As fate played its own drama, the conference coincided with the death of one of Israel's leading feminist academics and activists, Dafna Izraeli. Thus, at the last minute, the conference turned into an event dedicated to her memory—a dedication that could not have been more appropriate. As Hannah Naveh, Chair of the NCJW Women's and Gender Studies Program at Tel Aviv University, recalled from the podium, Dafna Izraeli represented a rare mix of a brilliant academic, an involved person, a generous benefactor, and a dedicated personal friend to all who knew her.

In writing down some of the highlights of this intensive encounter, I intend not to give an account of entire panels, but rather to pull together some of the ideas and debates brought up by participants across the different disciplines and sessions. This is my way of keeping the dialogue going even after the conference is over, and, as I hope, involving more people in the burning issue of women and poverty.

In the opening plenary session, Haya Stayer, Chair of the Department of Labor Studies at Tel Aviv University, voiced some criticisms of the con-

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ference's title, "The Feminization of Poverty." Though women are indeed poorer than men, there has been no significant increase in the percentage of women living in poverty. Furthermore, focusing on the poverty of women diverts attention from social or ethnic factors that are just as important. Stayer presented some interesting data: The extent of poverty in Israel is among the highest in the western world, but the difference between men and women in this respect is not great, since poor Israelis tend to stay married more than their counterparts in western countries. Thus, 14% of the married couples in Israel as against 25% of the single mothers are poor. To my understanding, this still represents a very wide gap.

Ruth Halperin-Kaddari of the Faculty of Law at Bar-Ilan University discussed some of the difficulties involved in gathering data on single mothers in Israel, a point that bears upon Stayer's arguments. As Halperin-Kaddari pointed out, conducting a thorough study of the status of single mothers requires access to records of divorce cases, and these have not been made available by Israel's rabbinic courts. Rifat Azam of the Hebrew University's Faculty of Law stressed an additional problem, this time in relation to married women. Under current Israeli law, married couples are obligated to file a joint tax return. Azam noted that the burden of this law, which results in a heavier tax toll on the couple, is not shared evenly. Since women usually earn less in Israel, the married woman, as part of a couple, ends up being taxed more than her husband on her earnings, which may prove to be a negative incentive for her working outside the home. Thus, Stayer's assumption that the data on poor married couples in Israel apply in the same way to both sexes needs some modification.

Smita Tewary Jassal, from the Center for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi, discussed the impact of global policies on the poverty of women, pointing to evidence from India that illustrates how processes of globalization affect the nature of poverty, especially with the retreat of the welfare state. Ultimately, economic and social inequalities cumulate, as can be said of Israel as well. Indeed, Sarai Aharoni of *Ishah Le'ishah* (Woman to Woman), a feminist center in Haifa, stressed that Israel is gradually turning from "a developed country" into "a developing country." Similarly, Ester Eilam of the *Ahoti* (My Sister) organization found that Israel manifests parameters of poverty that apply concurrently to different types of society.

Dafna Rubinstein of the Israel Women's Network traced the penetration of global capitalism into Israel via manpower agencies and contractors, leading

to the passage of new laws that allow for inequities in the working conditions of Israel's foreign workers. Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui of Beit Berl College and the New School of Communication at the College of Management stressed the impact of global capitalism on processes of inclusion and exclusion of women from the workforce. Highlighting the different kinds of jobs and conditions offered to female foreign workers in Israel, she noted that women from the Philippines, who are mainly offered jobs caring for the elderly, are compensated quite adequately, while young women from countries of the former Soviet Union are sold to the sex industry.

Miri Rozmarin of Tel Aviv University's Department of Philosophy added another dimension to poverty—the cultural one. Poverty is an outcome of social and cultural marginality. Even in cases where they themselves are the manufacturers of culture, women do not become its subjects. Instead, they are associated with the body and seen as objects. Another ideological manifestation of cultural poverty is the identification of women with the family, so that they are not grasped in themselves. This also emerged from the literature of antiquity at a guided reading session dedicated to excerpts from the Talmud and Midrash. Galit Hasan-Rokem and Chana Safrai, respectively of the Hebrew University's Department of Hebrew Literature and its Institute of Jewish Studies, showed how in many cases the national catastrophe of the Jews is represented through stories of the poverty endured by women and children. Thus, they turn into a stereotype of poverty

The political aspect of women's poverty was former MK Tamar Gozanski's main concern, as she stressed the need, for the sake of the political battle, to unite all pro-women activities rather than divide them into categories. Gozanski offered a vivid description of how global capitalism plays into the hands of Israel's rich and serves as a ruse to burden the poor with further economic inequities—so that the poor end up “donating” money to the rich.

The political aspect meant dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Karen Koning Abu Zayd, Deputy Commissioner General of UNRWA, described the organization's work to help Palestinian refugee women via long-term programs in the fields of education, health, and financial enterprises. She pointed out that UNRWA, the oldest UN agency of its kind, does not believe it should refrain from dealing with the political aspect of the refugee problem. Khalid Sindawe of the University of Haifa brought a specific example of cultural poverty, which, as mentioned earlier, is an outcome of social and cultural marginality. He discussed the life of Palestinian political activist

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and poet Fadwa Tuqan as seen through her memoir, *A Mountainous Journey*, whose first half recounts her personal struggle as a young woman raised in a conservative milieu.

Daphne Barak-Erez of Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Law stressed that while it is important to see social and economic rights as the concern of society as a whole, it is nevertheless vital to check each of the various weak sectors, particularly those that earn low wages, such as women, minorities, and foreign workers. The needs of women belonging to different sectors of the population are not necessarily the same, and, consequently, one cannot come up with a list of reform targets and priorities that will apply equally to all women.

Quite a few of the sessions and panels dealt with active social involvement. Members of various NGOs presented their activities and the sectors with which they are concerned. Thus, Hanan al-Sana described the activities of Sidreh, an organization dedicated to empowering Bedouin women in the Negev through adult education, help in family matters, fellowships for higher education, and a weaving factory. Ayelet Ilani and Chaula Rihani of the Association for Economic Empowerment of Women related that their association has so far helped 300 women, of whom 80 are currently running their own small businesses.

Rachel Levmore, a Rabbinical Court advocate associated with the Kolech (Your Voice) Religious Women's Forum, discussed the importance to women's financial welfare of encouraging young couples to sign a prenuptial agreement. The need for such an agreement derives from the exclusive jurisdiction of Israel's rabbinic courts over marriage and divorce among Jews. According to Jewish law, a wife's property is controlled by her husband, and only he can initiate divorce. Thus, if a woman asks for divorce, her husband may refuse her or demand compensation for his consent. This has led to many cases in which women must accept harsh financial settlements. Levmore, who is herself one of the principal authors of a recently published prenuptial agreement, stressed that such an agreement benefits the husband as well as the wife, since it puts the whole marriage on a firmer basis of mutual trust and dignity.

On several occasions, participants expressed their desire to hear more of the personal voices of poor women, rather than abstract, learned lectures. These voices were represented at the conference by women who gave testimonies of the hardships they had endured and by artistic works echoing

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life stories of poverty. I presented Rachel Furman-Elbaz's poetic evocations of her childhood in Wadi Salib, one of Haifa's poor neighborhoods, which gained publicity in the 1950s following acts of protest and insurrection, the first of their kind in Israel. Deep analysis of the poems reveals the child inside the adult poet, as well as the long-range effects of a childhood lived in conditions of poverty and deprivation.

Henriette Dahan-Kalev of the Gender Studies program at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev together with Havatzelet Ingbar presented the story of the women workers at Mitzpeh Ramon's textile factory. When the owners of the factory decided to close it, Ingbar and her co-workers, with the support of Israel's Labor Federation (the Histadrut), demanded that it be turned over to them and then began running it as a cooperative—a story so remarkable that it was turned into a television series, "Daroma" (Southward). Dahan-Kalev cautioned against an over-optimistic, over-simplistic view of this story, since the factory is currently facing severe financial problems.

The conference was a brainstorming, full of pain, vision, plans, and premonitions. I hope that, as the organizers and participants certainly wished, it will further the generation of activities and ideas for alleviating the conditions of poverty, hardship, and inferiority that affect so many women.