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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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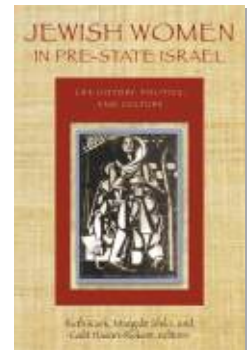
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“They Have Wings But No Strength to Fly”

The Women Workers’ Movement between “Feminine” Control and “Masculine” Dominance

Introduction

This discussion aims at exposing the system of relations and links between the various institutions of the Histadrut ha-Ovedim ha-Kelalit be-Eretz Israel (General Federation of Labor in Eretz Israel) and at pointing out the way they coped with the special issues of female workers. Taking this system of relations apart while simultaneously analyzing the plans for action by the Histadrut establishment and its intentions helps separate the concepts of “class” and “gender” and to examine them in the context of women in the Eretz Israel society.¹ The Histadrut’s Women Workers’ Movement (WWM) was born in protest against discrimination at the founding convention of the Histadrut in 1920.²

After an uncompromising battle by the women workers, a special department for women was established in the Histadrut headed by an elected representation that was called “Mo’etzet ha-Po’alot” (Women Workers’ Council). Mo’etzet ha-Po’alot was directly subordinate to the Histadrut’s Va’ad ha-Po’el (Executive Committee), and it dealt with the issues of the female Histadrut members from one general women workers’ convention to the next. The leadership of the women workers’ movement included Mo’etzet ha-Po’alot with its various departments, and—from the mid-1920s—the local women workers’ committees (eventually departments), which were subordinate to Mo’etzet ha-Po’alot and the municipal Mo’etzet ha-Po’alim (Labor Council).³

From the 1930s, the organizational structure of Mo’etzet ha-Po’alot became broader and more ramified, and it included the Municipal Council for Women’s Affairs, whose establishment we will discuss below, and the “Irgun

Imahot Ovedot" (Organization of Working Mothers). Initially, this was the organization of Histadrut members' wives and former women workers, which was intended to handle the issues of welfare and of the female members in the women workers' movement in particular and the Histadrut in general.

The leadership of the women workers' movement considered its belonging to the labor camp an unquestioned principle, supported by a ramified network of society and family ties, shared experiences, and a similar historical and cultural heritage. This duplication made it difficult for the leadership of the Women Workers' Movement, whose attachment to the establishment left it split between feminine loyalty — as a unique identifying mark — and loyalty to the Histadrut establishment, which symbolized the general principle.

The interval between the mid-1920s and the close of the 1930s is the background for the happenings discussed below. These years saw changes in the development of the women workers' movement, a derivative of processes that took place in the Histadrut in particular and in the Eretz Israel society in general. The 1920s were rife with crises. The women workers' movement apparatus suffered from operational difficulties and from inadequate work procedures; the organizational structure was weak, as were the definitions of the functions and limits of authority for the women holding those positions. In the 1930s, the historical rivalry between the main labor parties slowly subsided, and the brunt of effort was directed toward creating strong, leading labor power in the *Yishuv*.⁴ The Women Workers' Movement, like the Histadrut in general, underwent a clear process of bureaucratization and moderation of the radical forces previously active in it.⁵

Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot, the elected apparatus of the women workers' movement, sought answers to the organizational and fundamental dilemmas it encountered from its outset. Foremost was the issue of isolationism or integration within the General Histadrut with all of its institutions, and the second was the question of partisan politics or nonpartisanship within the women's movement.

One approach strove for expanding the authority of the apparatus and for "feminization" of the movement in the Histadrut. It was represented by Ada Fishman, a member of Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir and one of the initiators of the founding of the Histadrut's Women Workers Movement.⁶ Ada Fishman persistently worked toward expansion of the authority of Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot and for its glorification as an independent body within the Histadrut. She was consistently and firmly opposed to greater political party involvement in Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot. At the same time, her own attitude was not free of party

influence: Fishman's statements were in line with the aspirations of her party, Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir, to establish the most decentralized, independent labor federation possible.

The opposite approach, espoused by the women belonging to Ahdut ha-Avodah, the largest among the Histadrut parties and the leading one, called for giving priority to the Histadrut establishment—while subordinating all the other apparatuses including that of the women workers, to its authority. The abolition of the distinctive characteristics of the women workers' apparatus was the obvious result called for by this step.⁷

Two test cases demonstrate the complexity of the issues, namely, the selection of Golda Myerson to serve as the executive secretary of Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot toward the end of the 1920s, and the struggles for the establishment of local women workers' institutions in the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s.

“Never Was Discriminated”: Golda Myerson's Appointment to the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot Executive

Golda Myerson (Meir; 1898–1979) began her public career in Eretz Israel through party activity, with the women workers' movement being one of her channels. In the summer of 1921, she immigrated to the country and about a year later—in September 1922—she was a delegate in the Second Women Workers' Convention that was held in Haifa. She was chosen to serve on Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot, which operated intermittently and with difficulties until the end of 1925. With the dissolution of the elected council, Golda did not participate in the Central Committee for Women Workers Issues appointed by the Va'ad ha-Po'el—the executive arm of the General Federation of Labor.⁸

Serving on the appointed women workers' committee were other members of her party who already had garnered seniority in movement activity and were involved in what went on it. In contrast to them, Golda Myerson was detached from movement activity in those years; she lived with her family in Jerusalem, under harsh conditions that did not allow her to engage in public activity.⁹

In 1928, she returned to movement participation, after accepting the offer by David Remez, a member of the Va'ad ha-Po'el and eventually General Secretary of the Histadrut (1935–1945), to serve as the secretary of Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot. As she told it, she met Remez accidentally on a rainy day on a street in Tel Aviv; while she was talking with one of her acquaintances on the

stairs of the Va'ad ha-Po'el building, Remez turned to her and brought up the idea of "returning to work . . . and to become the secretary of the Histadrut's Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot."¹⁰ On her way back to her family in Jerusalem, Golda Myerson decided to accept the proposal.¹¹

The way Golda Meir joined the secretariat of the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot shows us what the accepted procedures were for filling positions in the Histadrut. In contrast to other women from her party, such as Hannah Chizik, Leah Maron, or Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, who had acquired experience in working with the women workers and with personal, unmediated encounter with their working world, Golda Myerson stood out for her meager experience, which did not stem from any special sensitivity toward the subjects of women workers or women in general.¹² Golda's success in joining the secretariat of Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot without having passed through the melting pot from which the other women leaders of the movement had come, teaches us about swooping from above into this central position and not of natural growth to a position of leadership in the movement. But Golda Meir's advantages made up for her junior position in her party and in the women workers' movement. It may even be that her relative anonymity, her partisanship, and her good connections with senior members of the party apparatus—such as with David Remez himself—were her prominent assets. Her connections with Remez, for example, went back to the days when he arranged work for Golda and her husband in Solel Boneh, a major construction company founded and owned by the Histadrut, in Jerusalem, thus helping the family to emerge from its bleak economic situation in Tel Aviv.

David Remez's choice was not by chance. By appointing Golda Meir to the secretariat of Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot, the members of the Histadrut establishment hoped to weaken the opposition inherent in the women workers' movement, as they identified it, namely, Ada Fishman's group and its supporters, members of Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir. Ada Fishman, a person holding independent views and one who did not hesitate to challenge the Histadrut leadership, was a nuisance to the Histadrut establishment, and it sought ways to diminish her influence. From their point of view, bringing in Golda Meir from above was a fitting solution. She was an obedient, loyal candidate, dependent upon party institutions, and a person who did not stand out for any prominent feminist tendencies.

Serving on the active secretariat of the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot was Golda Meir's first practical opportunity to grapple with a real role demanding performance in the Histadrut women's apparatus. Her period as secretary was fragmented and short, lasting for only a year and a half, during which she

traveled abroad for extended periods on various missions for her party and the Histadrut.¹³ Her appointment to fundraising tasks in America as a representative of the Histadrut, and actually as a representative of her party, caused angry repercussions among women belonging to the movement apparatus.¹⁴

Women members of Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir, and Ada Fishman in the forefront, considered Golda's appointment to go abroad on this mission as a purely political move intended to reinforce Ahdut ha-Avodah by means of connections with the "Pioneer Women's Organization" in America.¹⁵ Ada Fishman argued that if what was involved was a party mission, then it should be balanced—as usual in the Histadrut—by sending two representatives, one from each party. This subject was then raised at different Histadrut forums and roused great controversy—with the decision ultimately reached, as noted, in opposition to Ada Fishman and her supporters, having Golda Myerson traveling alone.¹⁶

The temporary absence of Golda Myerson from the secretariat did not calm things down. In that period, feelings within the movement apparatus were in a turmoil that did not abate upon Golda's return. The Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir women members who supported Ada Fishman were furious over the attempt to displace her and to crown a member of the rival party instead. The rivalry intensified owing to other fundamental issues then on the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot agenda for which no answer was found that satisfied Ada Fishman's supporters.¹⁷ The tension peaked when members of that group hurled the threat that they were ready to secede from Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot to establish a rival labor organization!¹⁸

Whether the threats were effective or whether there were other reasons, the battle was won by Ada Fishman and her supporters. In January 1930, after a short, stormy period of service, Golda Myerson turned in her resignation from the Active Secretariat, declaring: "I have the feeling . . . that I am not succeeding and I am not confident that I am doing what is necessary . . . I do not see any possibility for continuing my participation in the work of the secretariat."¹⁹

These hard feelings resulted from a number of factors, including family obligations and also her poor command of Hebrew.²⁰ It is even reasonable to assume that Golda Myerson had reached the conclusion that the hopes her mentors had pinned on her could not be fulfilled. She was incapable of turning into a bulwark against the oppositional elements in the Histadrut women's apparatus nor could she drive a wedge between the strong foci of power that operated within the apparatus. In a final, unsuccessful attempt to

bring the interparty rivalry in Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot to a conclusion, Golda tried to bring in a substitute from her party, Gusta Strumph.²¹

Of course, Golda Myerson had taken the upper hand in a number of previous confrontations in the movement, but Ada Fishman and members of Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir were the victors.²² Golda Myerson backed down from her demand for a central position in the leadership of the Women Workers' Movement and relinquished her spot, while Ada Fishman remained the leading power in the movement in the coming years. The success of her approach in charting the Histadrut women's movement policy, mainly regarding the economic aspect, which had been controversial until then, now became a *fait accompli*.²³

Thus, Golda Myerson's appointment to the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot Secretariat was a flagrant, never repeated, attempt at tipping the scales of the internal power struggle in the upper level of the Women Workers' Movement. Whether this was a one-time slip or a calculated tactic by the Histadrut establishment, such means were never needed again in the story of the balance of power between the women workers' institutions and the Histadrut. The more radical powers active in the movement in the 1920s became more moderate and gradually were replaced in the apparatus by female party activists much more obedient than their predecessors; their worldview and their methods of operation coincided, or were even coordinated, with the ruling party line in the Histadrut, that is, with Mapai. So more than the changes in Histadrut establishment behavior teach us about the strengthening of Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot, they attest to its submergence within the ruling political culture in the Histadrut and Mapai, its leading party.²⁴

The Grip of the Iron Fist: The Battles over the Establishment of Special Institutions for Women Workers

The difficulties involved in deciding whether to establish special institutions for women is not an issue specific to the Women Workers' Movement in the Histadrut.

The existing Histadrut organizational frameworks as well as its public forums seldom referred to women workers' issues, and in any event, the working women rarely expressed themselves.²⁵ As a result, feelings of isolation and alienation prompted the women to seek a separate, yet affiliated with the Histadrut, gender-based forum that would befit their needs and responding to them.²⁶ Of course, the creation of separate institutions for the women

workers roused great controversy in the Histadrut, crossing gender and party lines.

The controversy, which will be discussed below, revolved around the issue of establishing the Municipal Council for Women Workers, a local organizational body of women workers that was supposed to coordinate the handling of female Histadrut members in each city and large *moshavah*: workers for hire connected to the labor market, and homemakers who were not part of the labor market.

One can identify two main stages in the development of the local organization of the Women Workers' Movement. The first stage began in 1926 with the decision taken at the Third Women Workers' Convention to set up "women workers committees" and its confirmation at the Third Histadrut Convention a year later (1927).²⁷ A limited number of committees did begin taking initial steps, mainly in the big cities, Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem. The second stage began in 1937 with the establishment of the permanent institution: The Urban Council for Women Workers.

Women workers' committees were an integral part of the local Histadrut establishment. Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot, too, strove to dominate these institutions but without particular success. The limits of authority of the women workers' committees and their status were defined by the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alim, which also appointed the members of the women's committees. From their founding in 1926 until they were superseded by new institutions in 1937, the women workers' committees operated only intermittently and limitedly, and regretfully roused a feeling of discomfort among the bodies connected to their operation. Their restricted activity left a scant, insignificant impression among the long-suffering urban women workers.

The long, exhausting discussion about establishing local women workers' institutions began within the apparatus of the Women Workers' Movement as early as the close of 1925. Since no conclusion was reached in internal movement forums, the Va'ad ha-Po'el was called upon to decide, but its efforts were unsuccessful.²⁸ So the issue was raised at the Third Histadrut Convention in 1927.

Two opposing propositions were raised at this convention. The minority proposal by Ada Fishman and Hayuta Busel, members of Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir, supported, of course, the setting up of separate institutions by the women workers. As expected, their proposal was not accepted by the majority of members; the majority's proposal, for which 97 voted in favor and 79 against, determined: "An elected Women Workers' Committee elected by the local [workers] council. Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot, with authority defined by this deci-

sion, elected in each locality in proportional elections by the women workers."²⁹ The majority, therefore, decided in favor of maintaining its power and of continuing domination by the Histadrut establishment in the second-level institutions, this time in those of the women workers.

Yet, under the surface of the proposal accepted at the Third Histadrut Convention was a minor compromise: Permission was received to elect the broader body of the women workers, the Urban Council for Women Workers, by the women workers themselves. This body was intended to be an overarching framework for the local women worker's institutions, the Department (committee) for Women Workers, and the Organization for Working Mothers, which was constituted mostly of wives of Histadrut members, homemakers, that had begun partial, local operation.

Since implementation of the decision was delayed, the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot session, convened in 1928, decided — in opposition to the Third Histadrut Convention decision — to initiate the establishment of the urban councils for women workers' issues, so that they could elect the local women workers' committees. But defying the voice of the Histadrut establishment by part of the women belonging to the movement apparatus did not work out. This time, too, the movement apparatus did not manage to come to a decision that would be acceptable to the majority, and the subject was discussed again in the Histadrut institutions, this time at the Histadrut Council that met at the beginning of 1929. But the decision to hold the elections for the urban women workers' councils along with those for the Mo'etzot ha-Po'alim was never implemented.³⁰

Despite the obstacles, and even in the face of the firm opposition by the members of the general local workers' councils, the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot did not let up on the subject in the following years. Worrisome reports on the situation of the women workers goaded the women members of the apparatus to try to speed up the activity toward organizing the local institutions. Their efforts were fruitless and at the Fourth Women Workers' Convention (1932) the issue held central stage on the agenda.³¹ Only near the end of 1934 was a compromise finally achieved between Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot and Mo'etzot ha-Po'alim. Thus, it was determined that Mo'etzot ha-Po'alim would maintain a permanent urban institution for women workers' issues. A year and a half passed before the recommendations were presented to the Regulations Committee for Determining the New Institution, and in 1936, about a decade after the discussions had begun, it was finally decided to begin organizing the urban councils for women workers' affairs. In 1937, the Urban Council for Women Workers began to operate in the major cities, Tel Aviv

and Haifa. The establishment of the institutions was a compromise among the different approaches current in both the Histadrut and the Women Workers' Movement. The prolonged discussion attests to the difficulties inherent in resolving the conflicting objectives, and we will discuss that in the next section.

Gender Fear Rises: For and Against the Local Institutions for Women Workers

The stances of the Histadrut's various institutions point out that the heart of the controversy dealt with the source for the authority of the gender-based women's institutions, and in the broader context—the essence of the concept of authority in the Histadrut in general: Whether the whole body of women members of the movement, or at least their institutions elected at the general women workers' convention, should be the source for authority, or should the Histadrut apparatuses, which already had taken command of the women workers and their institutions, continue to do so by carrying on with the appointment of the women members to the various institutions.

In contrast to the Va'ad ha-Po'el, whose members generally supported the establishment of local institutions for women workers, male and female members of the Mo'etzot ha-Po'alim, mainly from Ahdut ha-Avodah, were among the most consistent opponents to the idea. Mo'etzot ha-Po'alim members and the trade unions subordinate to them did not hide their fear that the women workers' institution about to be formed would become a dangerous precedent. They claimed that the power inherent in these institutions was liable to turn them into an oppositionary element in the Histadrut and further entrench the phenomenon of "parallelism" (the establishment of parallel bodies) opposed by the Ahdut ha-Avodah members with all their might.³²

Their formidable opposition was the main obstacle thwarting the establishment of the institutions. At one of the frequent discussions between the members of the Mo'etzot ha-Po'alot Secretariat and the Mo'etzot ha-Po'alim secretaries, these fears were aired openly: "After that they will demand from us an elected General Employment Office, like the office for the women workers . . . a firm hand is necessary to determine the relations between us and the Mo'etzot ha-Po'alot . . . I am not certain and I have no idea who we will be dealing with."³³

Yet, even the most aggressive opponents were not able to ignore the plight

of the women workers. So it was that Ziama (Zalman) Aranne (Aharonowitz), of the Tel Aviv Labor Council, proposed in mid-1934 relief for the women workers' problems in the form of numerous women workers' assemblies during the year at which the women would be able to speak out on whatever they wished and to pour out their complaints.³⁴ To put this in other words, therapeutic sessions by all means! But the founding of a special institution to deal with the women workers' organizational, social, and economic problems was deemed totally unacceptable.

The vigorous protests of the women workers and their representatives were in vain. When all the opponents' arguments had been exhausted, Joshua Rabinowitz, another member of the Tel Aviv Labor Council, concluded the discussion of the issue by saying: "No council [of women workers] will be founded by us, because there is no room for it."³⁵ And he continued: "This is not an issue of [Mo'etzet Po'alot] elected or not elected. For we, too, are in favor of an elected [Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot] — by the Mo'etzot ha-Po'alim[!] [local men workers' council]."

Unfortunately, in the Women Workers' Movement, too, opinions were divided. The dispute between the members involved an issue of principle that had distressed the movement from its inception: isolation or integration into the Histadrut system. Some women activists rejected the idea of setting up separate institutions for women workers. They argued that Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot had to make every effort to integrate into the existing Histadrut institutions and not to invest resources in creating separate institutions.³⁶ Establishment supporters did not hide their fear of women workers' separatism, saying that the isolationist stance was likely to exacerbate estrangement from the women workers and the unfair treatment their needs received. In 1926, Pesya Gorelick, a member of the Tel Aviv Women Workers' Committee, formulated this feeling explicitly in a letter to Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot: "Our committee for the working woman's affairs discussed the issue and wishes to inform you that it is completely opposed to organizing the committee through special, separate elections for women workers only and to maintaining a separate (women's) committee . . . that is not a general component valid for the entire public of workers in the city . . . we are now presenting to you the committee's opinion, with which we agree and which we support, and ask that you take into consideration when you discuss this issue."³⁷

An opposite approach was represented by women belonging to the apparatus who kept foremost in their minds the interests of the women workers. As far as they were concerned, the establishment of special institutions for the women workers was a necessary, justified act owing to the unique group

needs of women; one must keep in mind, however, that they, too, began from a position of cooperation with the labor camp and supported joint action effort with the Histadrut establishment: "We do not intend to create a Histadrut of women workers parallel to the General Histadrut, we want to create an institution for women workers' issues — cells for initiative, thought, and sparking the general Histadrut institutions to action."³⁸ This means that special institutions for women workers was a result of their inferior situation and the institutions were perceived as an efficient means for reinforcing the workers.

The solid cooperation by part of the women's labor movement apparatus with the Histadrut establishment makes one wonder about the issue of commonality of gender consciousness versus movement loyalty. In many instances, one can identify a closeness between men and women at the leadership level that is deeper than the automatic identification of the women among the leadership of the women's apparatus with the general body of the movement women they were supposed to represent.³⁹ In light of such closeness, it is no wonder that the ills of the Histadrut's organizational culture did not skip over the women workers' institutions: conflicts between camps, party considerations taking precedence over other ones, and so on were no strangers to them at all.⁴⁰ What were the position-determining factors among Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot members? A number of factors prompted these split positions. Party affiliation was an important factor but not exclusive. From the members' responses, one may draw the conclusion that total, obligatory congruency did not automatically exist between their political affiliation and their attitudes.⁴¹ To be sure, most of the women supporting direct election to independent women workers' institutions did belong to Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir and the leftist Po'alei Zion party, following their parties' positions; but a minority of the supporters came from Ahdut ha-Avodah. Thus, one may say that party affiliation was significant but did not rule out other factors. A much more influential element was the women's position in the party hierarchy; it dictated the attitude of the female members of the apparatus on these issues. Women who held roles at a relatively senior level, who enjoyed status and prestige in their parties, tended more naturally to adopt the approach of their party's institutions. Gender issues remained secondary to national ones as well as to those involving the network of relations and the power struggles between the Histadrut and the parties.⁴²

The individual circumstances and personal experience of woman members of the movement apparatus also counted as a determining factor. Those women who had gained actual experience dealing with rank-and-file women

laborers knew their needs and difficulties well. They were not able, and probably did not want, to ignore the workers' distress and the strained relations between them and their movement's leadership. Setting up independent institutions for the women workers in which they would be able to exercise influence and express themselves was seen as an effective means for repairing that troubled web of relations and, of course, also for improving the women workers' situation.

The type of profession, level of professional training, and the degree of persistence in the job market are also important components in the creation of the entirety of personal experience of each of the women who were part of the apparatus. The ones who were active among the women workers of the city gained different experience, which molded their viewpoint, than their colleagues who belonged to communal settlements.⁴³ In contrast to the urban dwellers, the latter lived a relatively protected living style that provided for their basic means of subsistence, mainly shelter, food, and clothing. The communal system of life helped with the burden of daily tasks, such as childcare, housework, laundry, and cooking, freeing the women for activity outside their homes.

Above all those factors was the level of personal commitment of each one of the women to gender principles. A member of the establishment such as Ada Fishman, who although she held a senior position in her party, was foremost a person of vigilant feminist awareness, did not hesitate to admit that there did exist particularly feminine distress. Moreover, she felt duty bound to seek fitting solutions to women's difficulties, even at the price of clashing with the Histadrut establishment.

Therefore, the gender awareness of the women belonging to the apparatus, perhaps even more than the other factors listed, dictated the priority of movement and social importance to which they remained steadfast. The support system unique to the women workers, for which they strove with all their energy, was necessary, so they felt, to help the women workers overcome their inferiority in the labor market, in the Histadrut and party establishment, and in the *Yishuv* society at large.

Assessment of the New Institution

When the new institutions finally were established, none of those involved wanted to relinquish his hold, so the bodies ability to function was impaired. Prevailing among the organization branches was an awkward chain for

reporting whose coordination was impossible.⁴⁴ The new organization included the Urban Council for Women Workers that represented, as noted — according to the Va'ad ha-Po'el's decision — the women workers in the cities, hired laborers, and homemakers. The Urban Council for Women Workers was supposed to comprise thirty to fifty members elected by the local women workers and to serve for a period of a year or two.⁴⁵ The Department of Women Workers, which was the executive body of the local women workers' institution, operated within it. The Department of Women Workers replaced the Women Workers' Committee familiar from the 1920s. Similarly, the Urban Council for Women Workers included the Working Mothers Organization, which in 1934 had become a national body with a secretary affiliated with Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot.

The Department of Women Workers' secretariat, which had just been established, was obligated to report to three separate bodies: to the Urban Council for Women's Labor Issues, to Mo'etzet ha-Po'alim, and to Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot. The Urban Council for Women's Labor Issues, which was supposed to convene monthly, was forced to obtain authorization from Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot as well as Va'ad ha-Po'el before every gathering. They had to announce in advance, in writing and in public, the date of the meeting. Obviously, these operational procedures thwarted any chance for real activity. The need to obtain numerous authorizations within a reasonable period of time from Histadrut institutions, awkward coordination with different partners, numerous reports to go in different directions, and the watchful eye of Mo'etzet ha-Po'alim on the one hand and the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot on the other — all these turned the new institution into an uncomplimentary reflection of the convoluted operational procedures then common in the Histadrut.

So it was that at the end of the year of operation the hopes pinned on the new institution dissipated. Its members complained that the Histadrut institutions did not take the new institution seriously enough and actually prevented its development. The representatives of the hired women workers, members of the trade unions, were absent from its meetings and did not maintain the vital links between the women workers' world of labor and the level of organization in the Women Workers' Movement. Most injurious of all was the fact that many of the women among the membership of the new body did not act as emissaries of the women workers' group or as its representatives, thereby perpetuating its marginality in the movement and the Histadrut system.⁴⁶

In short, these institutions were not able to integrate themselves as an

influential, active body within the movement. Since they were not institutions of the women workers but were appointed by the Histadrut establishment and under its auspices, only a few of the women workers' needs were given expression by its activities. Moreover, the appointment of local women workers' institutions by the Histadrut establishment created an imbalanced system of dependence and influence: Mo'etzet ha-Po'alim members kept great power concentrated in their hands, so they influenced—actually, determined—which of the women members would occupy the various functions.⁴⁷ In contrast, the women members, who wanted to be appointed to the different positions in the women workers' institutions, needed a lobby that would support them. This situation intensified and underscored their dependence upon their sponsors on the Mo'etzet ha-Po'alim to whom they owed their loyalty.

Summary

The female Histadrut members were caught in the vise of double domination: in the grasp of the Histadrut establishment in the women workers' institutions on the one hand, and the hold of the apparatus of the Histadrut Women Workers' Movement among its body of members, on the other.

The attempts to solve the unique problems of the women workers within the framework of the Histadrut succeeded only in part, as seen in the struggle for the founding of local women's labor institutions. In any sphere where women organizing themselves carried a potential or actual threat to the Histadrut establishment, a process of fading away and retreat took place. So the damage was done by driving a wedge between into the authority of the apparatus at the different levels of organization in the movement, while intensifying the gaps between the movement's leadership and its body of members.

Mo'etzet ha-Po'alot was a partner in these trends. It copied and applied Histadrut centralism to the movement whose members desperately needed other solutions. And, of course, the greater the identification of the women's labor movement with the Histadrut establishment, the more their gender awareness weakened and diminished. In their enthusiasm to become an integral part of the establishment and to receive its blessing, they reproduced the organizational patterns and methods of operation common in the Histadrut and embedded them in the Women Workers' Movement.

In the period under discussion, the Histadrut women's movement leader-

ship saw two main “generations” of leadership and of perception of the organization. In the 1920s, current among part of the movement leadership was a view that combined sensitivity to class and to gender. A portion of the leadership experienced the development of the intimate Women Workers’ Movement of the beginning of the twentieth century and the early fruits of its innovative experiments. In contrast, in the 1930s there was a gradual change in Histadrut society, the leadership of the Histadrut women’s movement, and the population of women belonging to it; hired workers preferred in many instances not to join the women’s labor movement at all. The women workers who remained in the labor market at most joined the Histadrut-wide bodies that were to a great extent impervious to gender issues.

Marching in a safer track as far as the establishment was concerned, and a less controversial one, proved itself worthwhile. From an administrative point of view, the apparatus of the Women Workers’ Movement accumulated relative power, while its members turned into “professional” activists similar to their counterparts in the Histadrut establishment. The latter even rewarded its devoted male and female followers by recognizing the importance of their activity and rewarding them accordingly.

Thus, if in its early days the Women Worker’s Movement sprouted wings and aspired to try its strength, by the close of the period under discussion it no longer desired to fly by itself.