



A female Israeli officer giving a demonstration at a Women's Corps camp near Tel Aviv on how to handle a Sten gun, June 1948. Credit: Associated Press

Herstory // The Forgotten Story of the Women Who Built Israel – and Their Fight for Equality

There have generally been three ways in which women have entered Israel's history books: as artists, martyrs or grieving mothers. Feminist historians are working for the state's hidden figures to get the recognition they deserve

By Allison Kaplan Sommer | Apr 20, 2018

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From the earliest days of the state, images of women have played a central role in Israeli myth-making: from shapely girls in shorts tilling the kibbutz fields and fearless female soldiers wielding guns, to the nation's iconic fourth prime minister, Golda Meir, holding forth at high-level government meetings.

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The narratives that dominate Israel's history and its heroes – powerful military and political figures – have all been male. With the notable exception of Israel's only female prime minister, the contributions of many women who participated in the development of the state and its institutions have long been buried in archives, or relegated to family lore.

It is only in recent years that pioneering Israeli feminist scholars have made an active effort to rescue both individual women's stories and collective female experiences from obscurity, and that women have begun to appear in articles and books.



Dr. Sharon Geva. Israeli society remembers women "for being mothers and wives and girls and daughters; far less for themselves or their achievements." Credit: Ilan Assayag

"Raising Value: Returning Women to History" is a pioneering project launched by Dr. Sharon Geva in 2011, which aims to take their visibility a stage further. For the past seven years, as a lecturer at the Kibbutzim College of Education and Tel Aviv University, Geva has been assigning students a final paper in which they must thoroughly research and profile a significant Israeli woman, using primary sources in local and national archives, interviews, as well as previously published work.

She then puts the profiles on the internet (in Hebrew), with the goal, she says, of "promoting the status of women who made history but still exist at its margins."

Geva started by showing students Israel's Declaration of Independence from 1948. Only two of its 37 signatories were female, only one of them was widely known: Golda Meir. The other woman was Rachel Cohen-Kagan, a politician whose wide-ranging social activism had gone unrecorded by history – despite her being a sponsor of the first legislation promoting equal rights for women in



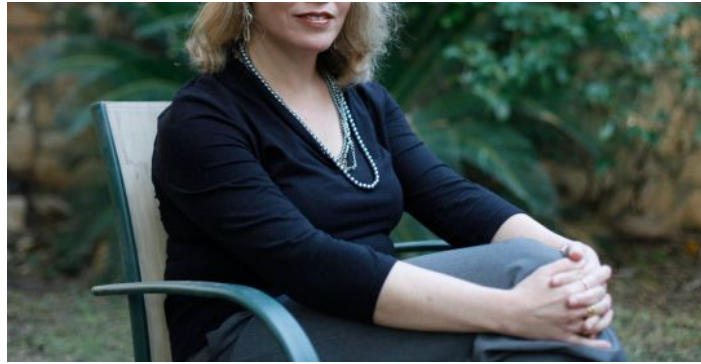
Golda Meir arriving at La Guardia Field, New York, May 1948. She was one of only two female signatories to the Declaration of Independence. The other was the lesser known Rachel Cohen-Kagan. Credit: Associated Press

And Geva isn't alone. While the focus at Bar-Ilan University's Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women is antidiscrimination research and activism, the center's director, Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, says that recognizing the untold history of Israeli women's struggle for equality is also part of its mission.

Halperin-Kaddari notes that 2018 marks the centennial of the first feminist organization in Israel, the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights in Eretz Israel – a milestone that would surprise many women. "How many Israeli women know that their fight for equality dates back that far?" she asks.

One hundred years ago, the newly formed Union of Hebrew Women began to engage in the battle for women's suffrage in the Jewish settlements of British Mandatory Palestine. The battle for the right to vote became a seven-year saga, fought from 1919 to 1926. The group also took on issues such as opposing child marriage and fighting for women's right to citizenship at the time of their immigration to the country, as well as the right to obtain – without their husband's permission – certificates for their families abroad on the basis of their own income.

Within this narrative there are individual stories long forgotten, like the one Halperin-Kaddari chronicled in an article detailing the little-known struggle of one woman to be permitted to practice law in Mandatory Palestine.



Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari. How many Israeli women know that their fight for equality dates back to 1918, she asks. Credit: Moti Milrod

Rosa Ginossar immigrated to Tel Aviv in 1922, after receiving her law diploma from the University of Paris. However, she was barred from taking the bar examination for foreign lawyers because of her gender. Her eight-year fight took her to the British authorities' Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled in 1930 that women could practice law in Mandatory Palestine.

A woman's role

Dramatic battles for women's rights even raged in the legendarily egalitarian kibbutzim where, whether they wished it or not, many women were relegated to traditionally female service positions. For example, they were put in charge of child care, cooking and laundry roles, and kept out of agricultural or managerial positions.

Although there was no gender pay gap on the kibbutzim, the fact that the women were not employed in roles that generated the collective's income affected their status.

Kibbutz women also successfully won the right to bear arms and perform guard duty during the Arab revolts of the 1930s – a move that laid the foundations for female participation in the pre-state Jewish militias and, eventually, the Israel Defense Forces.

The women who led these and other efforts have, by and large, not been remembered by history. Those whose names are remembered often have a familial connection to a famous man.

“Society is comfortable with women as mothers and wives of soldiers and leaders,” explains Geva. “They are remembered for being mothers and wives and girls and daughters; far less for themselves or their achievements,” she adds.

Mothers of fallen Israeli soldiers are often raised on a pedestal. Indeed, many Israeli feminists felt slightly dismayed recently when it was announced that one of the two women to be awarded the Israel Prize for 2018 was Miriam Peretz – a mother of two sons killed in combat. In March, Education Minister Naftali Bennett called Peretz “the mother of us all” when he announced her lifetime achievement award, given in recognition of her post-grief mission of educating and lecturing about Zionist and Jewish heritage, and helping other bereaved families.



Sara Netanyahu embracing Miriam Peretz in October 2016. Peretz will be awarded the Israel Prize in 2018 in recognition of her work educating about Zionist and Jewish heritage. Credit: Marc Israel Sellem

Geva notes that Peretz had a historical forerunner: Rivka Guber, who is immortalized as a street name in several cities, including Ra'anana and Kfar Sava. Guber played an almost identical role in the early days of the state, earning the nickname “Mother of the sons” after losing her two boys in the 1948 War of Independence. She won the Israel Prize in 1967, being honored for her activities in education and volunteering.

While both Guber and Peretz were admirable women who made impressive contributions to Israeli society, the fact they were venerated and remembered above women with equal or greater achievements was primarily a function of their private sacrifices, not their public roles.

Two other notable routes to iconic status have existed historically for Israeli women: One is outstanding artistic achievement, particularly poets such as Lea Goldberg and Rachel Bluwstein (better known as Rachel the Poet), songwriters like Naomi Shemer and Ofra Haza, and actors such as Orna Porat and Gila Almagor.

The other route is martyrdom. Israeli schoolchildren learn of Sarah Aaronsohn, a member of the underground Jewish spy ring, Nili, during World War I. Captured and tortured by the Ottoman Turks, she killed herself with a pistol at age 27 in order to avoid disclosing information. The other famous female martyr is Hannah Szenes (aka Senesh), who parachuted into Nazi-occupied Europe in 1944 to help organize resistance. She too was captured, tortured and refused to divulge information, eventually being executed by a firing squad.



It hasn't been since Golda Meir's day in the early '70s that an Israeli woman has worked her way into the elite club that determines the fate of the nation, and an indisputable place in its canon of leaders. Tzipi Livni is the only woman to have come close in the post-Golda years, holding eight cabinet positions and featuring in Forbes Magazine's list of the world's 100 most powerful women three times in a row between 2006 and 2008.

The army way



Hanna Beit Halachmi. "In Israel, to become powerful professionally – economically and socially – the army is central." Credit: Moti Milrod

Hanna Beit Halachmi, a strategic consultant and feminist activist, notes that a major obstacle for ambitious Israeli women is that most roads to leadership pass through the Israeli army. And until very recently, she says, women's inability to gain combat experience acted as a barrier to advancement in that arena.

With the introduction of female combat soldiers in 2000, the situation may be changing, with a path cleared for women to acquire the type of military experience long seen as necessary to serve in the political halls of power.

"In Israel, to become powerful professionally – economically and socially – the army is central," says Beit Halachmi. "And only now can we foresee a day when there will be high-ranking female officers or even, potentially, a female chief of staff.

"This is why some of the rabbis are coming out so strongly against women in the army – it changes the rules of the game," she adds, referring to recent comments by several outspoken spiritual leaders serving in pre-military academies. They have even advised observant men not to serve in coed units with women.



Members of the women's division of the Stern Gang are given physical examinations before induction into the Israeli army, June 1948. Credit: Associated Press

Compared to Europe and the United States, progress toward a greater female presence in the political arena has been unusually slow. But the tide is turning. Today, for the first time, more than a quarter of Israeli lawmakers are female. And this is despite the fact that ultra-Orthodox political parties refuse to allow women to serve in their ranks.

Halperin-Kaddari – herself an Orthodox-Jewish woman – Geva and Beit Halachmi all believe it is the major influence of the ultra-Orthodox political leadership, and the power it holds through the Chief Rabbinate, that poses the greatest obstacle to Israeli women’s ability to achieve true equality and visibility at every level – including the very highest.

When they do, perhaps women will finally occupy a place at the center – not the margins – of the national narrative. History, after all, is written by the winners.



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