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Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Intense engagement: Young women in Israel forging feminist subjectivities

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 17 June 2009

SYNOPSIS

This article on young feminist activists in Israel explores the formation of feminist subjectivities using in-depth interviews and focus groups. Findings reveal identifications with, alongside re-articulations of, existing feminist norms and values, exposing a productive tension between “the personal” and “the political”. Beside decisive motivation to act for social change, women use the movement as a supportive setting for identity work. This entails a fair amount of emotional boundary maintenance to mitigate out-group hostility to feminism, and in-group expectations to toe the collective line. The article outlines issues that preoccupy young activists and puts them in a broader context of Israeli feminism and of local cultural expectations regarding the management of forbidden emotions. We argue that the process of boundary maintenance that is implied in the activists' standpoints and experiences has a paradoxical effect of reinforcing feminism's attachment to the cultural surroundings that the movement is initially set to oppose.

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Introduction

Contemporary feminist movements tend to be preoccupied with their internal tensions, from generational relations, through ethnic, class, and race relations, to the politics of sexual and gender identities. The increase in attention to differences has been caused by several developments, among them post-colonial challenges that accuse traditional feminisms of ethnocentrism and class/race blindness (e.g., Hernandez & Rehman, 2002; Narayan & Harding, 1998; Springer, 2002; Thompson, 2002) or a general anti-essentialist stance in post-modern theory (e.g., Wittig, 1992). But it also emanates from the entry into the movement of young women who have grown up with a sense of feminism as a plain fact of social life, and who therefore feel confident enough to measure feminist positions against their lived gendered experiences (e.g., Braithwaite, 2002; Budgeon, 2001; Detloff, 1997; Rich, 2005). Examples abound of young, often self-declared third-wave feminists, who claim natural entitlement to freedom from sexual and racial violence, and in

the same breath reject what they deem the “victim feminism” of their elders (e.g., Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Trioli, 1996). Underlying many of these debates is a growing demand to endorse feminism as at once a tool for political activism and a source of personal identity. This basic tension is echoed also in our research among young feminist activists in Israel, whose evolving subjectivities are informed by a complex of collective and personal motivations.

Zooming into the Israeli feminist scene in the early years of the new millennium reveals intensely engaged young activists. The content that emerges from the interviews and focus groups held for this research is rooted firmly in the recent history of the movement. Young women seem happy and proud to embrace many existing feminist ideas, yet they do not accept them as given. The tone, the style, and the thematic variations are distinctly contemporary, as women constantly question familiar positions and creatively articulate new ones. A consistent subtext throughout the different topics that were raised is an ongoing tension between “the personal” and “the political”. While young women endorse the old feminist tenet that “the personal is political”, and readily apply it to their own private biographies, they nevertheless feel it is high time for them to reclaim their

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personal space within the political feminist narrative. The themes that recur in their discourse seem to cluster into opposing ends of loneliness and togetherness, total commitment to the collective alongside a need to defend their individual autonomy, or earnest admittance of power differentials inside the movement along with resentment at identity politics for its injustice to their complex subjectivities. The young activists' discourse hence reveals an intense emotional mindset, as they move back and forth between a sense of identification and charged argumentation with feminist norms and values.

This article, then, depicts a localized version of being feminist. We find that joining the movement has a powerful and often even revolutionary effect on young women. They tend to derive much fulfillment from acting collectively for social change, and to experience exciting friendships, erotic intimacy, and personal growth. At the same time, their initial belonging to a patriarchal and militaristic society imbues this ongoing process with antagonism, and compels them to invest serious emotion work in boundary maintenance. They sense that they belong and do not belong both within and without the movement. Concomitantly, their navigations between the different parts of their social world have complex implications for the movement as a whole, affecting its internal relationships as well as its attachment to the larger society. The main empirical section is dedicated to describing the prevalent mood and opinions of young activists, and the following section then puts these in context. Responding to the deeply embedded nature of their involvement, we dwell on some of the mutual feminist and non-feminist cultural influences on the women, on the local version of forbidden emotions, and on local sensitivities in Israeli culture to the politicization of any issues that are considered "social", let alone "personal". This contextualization finally leads us to argue that the ongoing process of boundary maintenance implied in the activists' standpoints and experiences has the paradoxical effect of reinforcing feminism's attachment to the cultural surroundings it is initially set to oppose.

Feminism as a multi-faceted form of cultural production

For more than two decades now, scholars of new social movements have distanced themselves from the previous theoretical wave that focused on organization, rational strategizing, and resource mobilization. In contrast to Resource Mobilization Theory, New Social Movements Theory looks at social movements as sites of cultural production and identity formation (Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield, 1994; Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000; Taylor & Whittier, 1995). Yet as several scholars have noted (e.g., Edelman, 2001; Ruggiero, 2000; Shefner, 1995), this theoretical dualism is problematic since developments have not been linear. While the character of social movements since the 1980s has indeed changed in response to broader changes in the national and world orders of late modernity, memberships have not necessarily become one-dimensional experiences. Instead, a theoretical synthesis is called for to account for complex, multi-faceted situations whereby membership in social movements is motivated by identity and meaning making together with effective organizing and resource mobilization.

Cheryl Hercus (2005), in a study of Australian feminism, offers a way out of the dualistic debate in social movements' theory in her notion of a fractal model. Borrowing a metaphor from fractal geometry, she uses the idea of shapes (fractals) that exhibit self-similarity at various scales and that are created through processes of iteration. A fractal model of becoming and being feminist means that the process involves four intertwined components of subjectivity: knowing (consciousness), feeling (emotions), belonging (identity), and doing (action), each of which exists not only at the individual, but also at the collective level. The idea of fractals facilitates an integrative analysis, thereby defeating the tendency in much of the social movements' literature to present the process of becoming involved in collective action as linear, thus necessarily emerging in a specific order, and to prioritize one component of subjectivity over others. As Hercus (2005: 13) cogently writes, "Movements matter to people not because they create ready-made biographies/subjectivities for them to adopt...but because they alter the conditions within which individuals can create biography/subjectivity".

We find that Hercus' model provides a useful analytical framework for the case of young Israeli feminists too. As we show shortly, a highly striking feature in their discourse is the ease with which they move between seemingly contradictory positions, which are nevertheless coherent enough in their subjective perspectives. The notion of the fractal model is pertinent to our case as it accommodates the multiple aspects of feminist experience within organized settings, allowing us to look simultaneously at ideologies, actions, and emotions, and at the mutual influences between the movement as a collective phenomenon and individual members within it.

Feminism in Israel: background

Organized feminism in Israel dates back to the pre-state phase of nation-building in the early 20th century, when women's organizations formed within the dominant branches of the nascent Zionist movement (Bernstein, 1992; Margalit-Stern, 2002; Safran, 2006).¹ The major achievements of the early activists were the right to vote and to be elected, as well as a significant array of social rights and welfare services that benefited working mothers in particular. This incorporation of core civic and social rights already at the stage of state formation, while undoubtedly of major importance, had paradoxical outcomes. Despite a gender discrimination finely woven into the very fabric of state and social institutions (Berkovitch, 1997; Moore, 1998), and moreover operating in close articulation with ethnic and national hierarchies (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1997; Hasan, 2002; Swirski & Safir, 1999), Israeli women, particularly of the dominant Jewish-Ashkenazi middle-class and/or "working settler" groups, believed for decades that they had full gender parity and therefore did not need feminism. This internalized belief was boosted by the narrative of "Westernization" that depicted Israel as modern and democratic, the vanguard of enlightenment in a traditional Levantine surrounding, as well as by lack of ideological pluralism (Moore, 1998). It was not until the late 1970s that a new surge of organized feminism ventured to question the equality myth in public and to unearth taboo issues such as domestic violence and the patriarchal nature of the state.

The now familiar shift from rights and services to naming the patriarchal basis of liberalism, which characterized much of European and North American feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, was particularly radical in Israel, where the Zionist modernization project used women's liberation as a major trope of its cultural supremacy. For example, the incorporation of a campaign against domestic violence into the Civil Rights Movement created powerful resentment in the latter (Safran, 2006, pp. 88–89). The fight against domestic violence or against the monopoly of the religious courts over personal status was eventually endorsed by the dominant secular-liberal sector, which projected these problems onto the poor, religious, Mizrahi or Arab sections of society (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1997). However, anti-militarism and the exposure of male domination in the political-civil-military elite proved much more difficult to swallow. Even within the movement radical politics soon touched another sensitive nerve, that of ethnic hierarchies among the activists themselves. In the 1980s, and more markedly since the 1990s, feminists from marginalized ethnic and national backgrounds started naming and challenging the social connections of many of the Ashkenazi core activists, and their cultural investment in the state elite (Gibel Azoulay, 1989; Damary Madar, 2002).

A snapshot of the state of the movement in the new millennium reveals a handful of grassroots feminist centers, mostly in the big cities, and numerous ad hoc reading and support groups all over Israel. Besides hotlines and shelters for victims of domestic violence and rape crisis centers, which are by now heavily funded by the state, feminist NGOs operate a diverse array of projects. A partial list includes a coalition against sex trafficking, sexual education for girls, defending women's reproductive health, promoting lesbian feminist politics, various economic empowerment schemes and support programs for low-income women, or gender mainstreaming of conflict management and political negotiations. Last but not least, there are several very active feminist groupings within the peace movement (see, e.g., Abdo & Lentini, 2002; Herzog, 1999), notably Women in Black (Helman & Rapoport, 1997; Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003) and New Profile, which operate under the umbrella of the Coalition of Women for Just Peace. By and large, activities and groupings tend to be separate for Jewish and Arab women, although feminists from the two national groups also form ad hoc or permanent coalitions, and occasionally Jewish-dominated groups attempt to incorporate Arab women, as is the case in Isha L-Isha ('woman to woman'), which is represented in our research. The structure of grassroots feminism among Israeli Palestinians and the issues they address tend to be similar to those of Israeli Jews, yet the funds available to them are significantly smaller.²

Contemporary feminism in Israel relies on orderly fund-raising, primarily among US Jewry (Ilani, 2001) and other foreign foundations, with partial participation of state agencies. Donations are given per specific projects, which are normally implemented over the course of several years by NGOs or sections within institutions, using combinations of hired and volunteer woman power. This resource mobilization mechanism brings about a proliferation of concrete activities for social change, which highlights a puzzling reality: the indisputable visibility and indeed concrete achievements of local feminism notwithstanding, activists are frustrated and

outraged by the apparent resilience of patriarchal oppression. While feminism, surely radical feminism (where more than half of our interviewees are located) decidedly aims to bring about systemic and even revolutionary change, it has in effect become a constant component within patriarchy. Concomitantly, well formed (because of the fund-raising procedures) projects are launched frequently, drawing women to invest much time and effort in their implementation. Yet although activists keenly want these projects to succeed, their passion is directed primarily by their belongingness to the group, independent of the projects' actual accomplishments.

Beside grassroots activism, feminism in Israel features in the mass media and in academia. In the media the effects of feminism are somewhat difficult to determine. On the one hand issues such as sexual and domestic violence tend to get massive coverage, and strong, assertive women from a variety of fields seem to star on the screen. Yet the majority of women in these circles refrain from adopting an explicitly feminist self-identity, and critical-feminist commentaries on politics, economics, or culture are systematically marginalized and even silenced. In academia, gender studies broke ground in the mid-1990s, and today almost all universities and colleges offer at least a minor in women's studies, with one offering a major and another a graduate program. Feminist theory and empirical research are thriving, as is students' demand for women's studies courses, although positions and academic prestige still lag behind. Our interviews reveal that the presence of feminist scholars in various ranks of academia seems to have a charismatic effect on young women, who often ascribe to these scholars power and authority.

To sum up this brief profile, a prominent characteristic of contemporary Israeli feminism is that while it has proliferated and become more prominent, its integration into the larger culture and society has paradoxically grown stronger too. This is not to say that it has become popular. The activists' narratives below testify clearly that reactions to feminism remain largely hostile and dismissive. Nevertheless, our analysis reveals that despite the ongoing antagonism between feminist positions and mainstream patriarchal culture, the ongoing work of maintaining the boundaries between the activists' different reference groups reinforces the attachment of feminism to its cultural surrounding.

Method

Research for this article was conducted in 2005. It included 25 in-depth interviews with feminist activists in their twenties and early thirties, and two focus groups with activists of diverse age ranges, totaling 24 participants. Because this preliminary research was limited in scope we chose to focus on the innermost circles of the movement, namely women who define themselves as activists and are involved in organized grassroots groups. About half the participants were from Isha L-Isha Haifa, a feminist center in the northern city of Haifa, where the first author is also an active member. Ishal L-Isha Haifa is the oldest feminist organization in Israel, having operated continuously since the early 1980s. It is generally identified with radical feminism and is counted as part of the hard core of the movement. The 12 interviewees from there were reached by the snowball method. They all know each other and meet regularly at the center. The rest of our participants live and work

at the greater Tel Aviv area, in the center of Israel. These women were reached through a feminist electronic network, The Israeli Feminist Forum, which is one of the largest active feminist communities in Israel, operating as a platform for information and knowledge exchange, as well as shared activities. Through this list we posted a message inviting volunteers to be interviewed for our study. Responses to our call were overwhelming, but we could not accommodate more than 13 interviews in that part of the country. We therefore selected the participants according to criteria of self-testified involvement in feminist activism (as it turned out, only one interviewee did not meet this criterion) and age (i.e. born in the late 1970s or 1980s). While some of these 13 participants know one another and are partners in activism, most are affiliated with different groups. Lastly, in both locations our selection of participants was guided by an attempt to make the sample as diverse as possible in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation (see Table 1 for sample composition), issues that have preoccupied local feminism for over a decade (Dahan-Kalev, 2001; Shadmi, 2007; Shiran, 2002). Yet in the narratives below we do not identify speakers by ethnic or national origin or by sexual orientation, because women across the board evinced much similarity in their emotional engagements and oscillation between personal and political, and because each sub-group was too small to attempt finer distinctions.

Interviews were semi-structured. Each author interviewed one younger activist in Haifa and Tel Aviv. The Haifa-based interviewee was thereafter recruited as a research assistant, and conducted interviews in Haifa, and a second research assistant conducted interviews in Tel Aviv. The leading questions addressed issues relating to the meanings of feminism for each interviewee, to her experience of being a feminist, and to the role of feminism in her overall life story. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. In line with the overall scheme of content analysis and narrative analysis (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994), the transcribed interviews were then analyzed separately by each of the two researchers for leading motifs, underlying narratives, thematic clusters, and recurring key words.

Focus groups were convened at Isha L-Isha in Haifa and at the Feminist Women's Home in Tel Aviv. Each meeting was advertised on the respective center's network and was held

with whoever attended. At the meetings we related the main issues that came up in the interviews and invited the participants to comment on them. We thus used the focus groups as opportunities to gather new information, but also to share the learning process with members of the community and to enhance the credibility check of our own interpretations.

Voices of young feminist activists in Israel

This section presents recurring motifs in the women's narratives. Underlying the different themes is an ongoing problematization of the old-time feminist tenet that "the personal is political." "The personal" emerges in young women's persistent demand to have their own "voice" and to instate their own "place" within the movement, in their indulgence in their sensuality, or in their acclaim of women's egotism. "The political" recurs in their taken-for-granted demands for complete sexual/gendered freedom and safety, or in their framings of large-scale issues, such as the occupation of the Palestinians or ethnic divisions in Israeli society, as quintessentially feminist issues. Still, the appearance of conceptual oppositions notwithstanding, in the women's own eyes their narratives are perfectly consistent. The contingent complex of collective and individual, outward and inward orientations, consciousness, actions, and emotions presented in this section therefore conveys a dynamic but coherent experience of being feminist.

Pains and joys of connecting

Many of our interviewees described their first encounter with organized feminism as an intense, even moving experience. They all felt a strong attraction from the very first moment, but joining in was not necessarily a simple process. For example, Iris said:³

"My first experience in Isha L'Isha was difficult. It was an open meeting in which three women who had been raped told about their experiences. I sat on the floor because there were not enough chairs, shrunken. The content was extremely difficult for me. Afterwards the old-timers spoke... How shall I put it? They spoke as if they feared no one. Like no one could stop them. They had a lot of self-confidence and a lot of strength... It seemed a little like a commune where I didn't know the members. I experienced that discussion as aggressive. It left me worn out but also made me curious. F looked like a hybrid, and L – well she looked like she'd come out of a fairytale book and was walking outside its edges. There was a medley of characters there, of a kind I hadn't encountered before. At that event I clearly felt that I was connecting. I spoke about it for hours with the woman who had took me. Despite my shrinking back, I felt at home. This home beckoned me to check it out. Sometimes I loved it, and sometimes I felt angry at it."

Not all first encounters were difficult, yet they were always emotionally intense. Many interviewees described a sense of elation at their first meeting with organized feminism. Muna said, "It was the first time I had ever been in a place where all the participants were women, and it made me euphoric. I would arrive and feel that I was starting to float. I'd

Table 1
Description of the sample (N 25).

Age	Age range 20–35	Average age 29
Ethnicity/religion	19 Jewish	11 Jewish Ashkenaziyot 6 Jewish Mizrahiyot 2 Jewish mixed
	6 Arab	1 Arab Muslim 3 Arab Christian 1 Arab Druze 1 Arab Bedouin (Muslim)
Personal status	2 Married with children 3 Married without children 19 Never married (of these, 3 living with a permanent female partner)	
	1 Divorced	
Sexual orientation	16 Heterosexual	
	7 Lesbian	
	2 Refused to identify their sexuality	

get energies for the entire week.” Rabab: “My experience at the feminist conference was incredible. I felt that this place was bigger. I felt like a feminist and I felt that there was something called feminism, and that other women could feel it too... We were women's power, net. There weren't any men”. Similarly, Rasha said, “I came to Isha L'Isha by chance and fell in love.” Lastly Debbie: “In the Gender Studies Department I suddenly felt wonderful. I felt like ‘wow’”.

Notwithstanding the strong sense of connection that most of the women reported on encountering organized feminism and the warm welcome that many of them experienced, acceptance in those places is usually a long and somewhat difficult process. Women reported that they were made to feel marginal, had to prove themselves, and often needed a long time, even several years, before they could speak in public and feel that their words carried weight. For example, Neta, who lives in greater Tel Aviv, describes her initial attempts to leave her job in a private law firm for a position in one of the women's organizations: “No one thought much of this person who came to help, although as far as I was concerned it [her decision to become involved] was sensational”. However, she also tells about several old-timer feminists, women in their fifties or sixties, who embraced her. “E not only accepted me, she also really believed in me. It was amazing. And L, who was the head of the Women's Administration at the municipality, served as a role model for me. She was a professional teacher and she also truly believed in me. It was amazing”. Stories of odd mixtures of a warm welcome while being made to feel like an outsider for a long time came up in many of the interviews. Neveen, who has been active in Isha L'Isha for over ten years, says: “It took me about five years to feel that Isha L'Isha was my home. Today when I speak, women feel that what I have to say is important. It wasn't like that in the beginning”. And Yuli says, again about Isha L'Isha, “It took me two years to open my mouth, to just be able to open my mouth there”.

One thing that makes many of the women feel shy or inhibited is the eloquence and self-assured style of the activists. Their determination, their clear positions and their ability to respond fast and sharp to issues and situations leave a powerful, rather negative impression on newcomers to feminism, as they do on people outside the movement. Yet while to a complete outsider sometimes the decisiveness and firm opinions serve primarily to reinforce the stigma that feminists are “threatening” and “dogmatic”, newcomers to the movement respond with a mixture of resentment and awe.

Totality

“For me, feminism is the looking glass through which I look at the world, which makes everything a feminist issue. Today even more than before, I can't isolate it. It affects every aspect of my life. I can't enjoy a movie, read a book, or listen to songs, and I surely can't watch commercials [if they contain sexist or racist messages]. Even the choice, say, of what soap to buy is to me related to feminism. I don't buy products that are made in the Jewish settlements of the West Bank, or products that use sexist advertisements... it's everywhere.” (Yael)

Nearly all the interviewees declared that once they have adopted the feminist viewpoint, they apply it to practically everything they see, hear, or experience. Everything, from arts to relationships to lifestyles, is scrutinized through the feminist lens. Such totality nourishes a strong sense of isolation and loneliness in regard to general society, and a strong preference to socialize almost only with other feminists. In a somewhat circular way, though, the preference to spend more time with feminists and to minimize contact with people who do not share a “feminist outlook on life” usually emanates from a pre-existing sense that they do not fit in.

The sense of totality rests, first and foremost, on the positive identification with a critical outlook. However, “totality” tends to become overwhelming and women are aware of the price tag. Iris, for example, feels that her own feminist consciousness has made it impossible to let things pass her by any longer. She cannot keep silent now on hearing racist or sexist comments at work or at social gatherings, even though she knows that she has become “marked” as a feminist. She therefore understands women, such as her sister or some of her high-school friends, who act like feminists but refuse to take on the label.

Another aspect of the all-pervading character of feminism among young activists is their sense that they have always been feminists, “even before I could call it by its name”, as many put it. Iris says:

“For me, feminism is like a subversive reading of life. It's a subversive conduct within life. Ever since I was a little girl I had a suspicious attitude to posters... to all kinds of ideal representations. For instance, posters of families, I'd always wonder what's behind the glossy layer. I remember peeling the glossy layer off when I was as young as three or four, to see what's behind the picture. I knew that it was not doing a service to me or to T or Y or N [her sisters and friend]. “(Question: Did you think that it was not doing a service to women, specifically?)” It was clear to me that it had to do with women.”

Similarly, Lili explicitly declares that she was “always a feminist”, long before she was aware of it. When asked what made her a feminist, Lili replied: “Even as a very young girl I was always attuned to any injustice done, I always cared about the weak and wanted to act for them, and that's what feminism is about, as far as I'm concerned”. When asked if she knew any feminists in the small northern town where she grew up, she said, “It was a wilderness there, I don't think anyone ever mentioned the word ‘feminism’ or knew it existed”. Muna, again, relates that the first time she heard the word feminism, during a course at the university, she became enthusiastic and thought “Wow, all the things I've been doing in my life, all the conflicts I've had with my family... it's not that I'm just a rebel”.

To some extent, the women's feelings that their critical outlook was always in the air may reflect the fact that many of them grew up when feminism was already an existing and accessible option, embodied, articulated, and to some extent even institutionalized. Among our respondents, only one interviewee said clearly that she was not a feminist until her early twenties, when she started dealing with her complex feelings toward her mother and realizing that she (the mother)

had been abused by her husband. This woman, who felt it important not to deny her past identification with her aggressor father, resembled Jewish activists of older generations, for whom feminist consciousness-raising entailed breaking the constitutive myths of their youth, namely that as daughters of the Zionist project, and particularly its left wing, their world was gender-egalitarian (Safran, 2006). Many of the women who participated in our research, likewise, felt that their contemporary feminist understandings helped them make sense of their lifelong motivations and reactions.

Loneliness

Loneliness was a recurring motif among many of the interviewees. Many described a lifelong experience of loneliness, which was thrown into relief when they could name their particular discontent and then join a support group. Rabab says: "I came to Isha L'Isha to stop being on my own with the don'ts". Yet the outcomes of joining feminist circles have been somewhat paradoxical. While women report finding friends, support groups – indeed a community, they at the same time report drifting ever farther from normative social circles, represented by their family, workmates, or friends. These women feel that they have become marked and that feminism has turned their life into "a daily struggle", as one respondent put it. Almost all the women who were interviewed found exciting, often erotic intimacy in the feminist circles. Anat, for example, talked about her excitement during her first visits to Isha L'Isha, at taking part in open casual talk on sexuality. Rabab said, "The truth is that I've come to feminism to find friends". At the same time, in the non-feminist environment, the women's sense of isolation tends to grow stronger the more they become involved within the movement. Women describe a strong stigma on feminism in Israeli society in general, which is readily attached to them as soon as they identify. Ravit said: "When you say 'I'm a feminist' it smells a little like 'I'm going to these workshops where women connect to their feminine power, I'm aggressive. I burn bras and don't remove the hair in my armpits'. It's got this smell and some people become hostile". Responses to these all too common reactions, which practically all participants attested to, include a range of strategies, from ceaseless arguing to conscious avoidance of confrontations. Importantly, the opposing feelings of loneliness and coziness are not neatly divided between a hostile outer world and a harmonious one inside the movement since, as we noted before, the former often spills into the feminist circles themselves. Concomitantly, a sense of loneliness and isolation does not necessarily mean that the women feel miserable most of the time. Their identities as feminists also include a strong sense of entitlement to pleasure and gratifications, as will be shown shortly.

Yearning

For many of the women who participated in this study, feminism explicitly involves action for social change. As they described their private journeys to feminism, almost all the interviewees rejoiced in the discovery that they were not alone, not in their burning need to stand up for what is right for women nor, in quite a few cases, in their histories of abuse. Relating the sense of preciousness that they felt on finding

feminism, women told about the erotic excitement in becoming close to so many women. Many also stressed how only within the movement could they finally stop apologizing for their deep-seated and relentlessly critical outlook. It is therefore safe to say that among young feminists in Israel yearning for "the collective", in the double sense of collective good and a concrete reference group, remains an important component, as it has been since the movement's inception, with some contemporary variations. For one thing, involvement in collective action today draws increasingly on paid labor. While women continue to volunteer, organized actions depend more and more on fundraising, and women are paid to coordinate them, which results in an array of part-time paid positions in the various organizations. In our sample, 15 out of the 25 interviewees had at some point earned their living from work in feminist organizations. Since salaries in most of these jobs are not high, considering the educational skills of the women involved, these positions hardly justify the comment made by an old-time activist: "In the past women asked, 'What can I do for feminism?' Today they ask, 'What can feminism do for me?'" Women seek employment in feminist organizations, and are willing to downscale their earnings, because they find it empowering and satisfying, or because they want to help women.

Another contemporary aspect of yearning for the collective, besides the historically new possibility to use feminist organizations as opportunities for employment, was that the women's commitment to collective action often involved an emphasis on the self and on individuality. Importantly, to the young activists themselves, their collectivist and individualist orientations did not necessary seem to contradict. Yet they felt that older women in the movement had a different take on things. Many of our interviewees criticized what they perceived to be a norm among their elders, to prioritize collective struggles over personal desires and preoccupations. They often felt that the previous generation's slogan "The personal is political" gave undue weight to the latter at the expense of the former, and they wanted to rectify this.

Many of our interviewees expressed a strong sense of entitlement to put themselves at the center and demanded that their personal variant be included in the collective narrative. Nira, for example, said, "As far as I'm concerned, feminism today is an umbrella of sisterhood that is loose enough for me to define myself as I wish". Not surprisingly, the words "my voice" and "my place" were extremely prevalent in their discourse. The women tended to be highly self-conscious and reflexive. Notwithstanding their anti-essentialism, their commitment to be true to what they feel is their authentic self is often as strong as their commitment to the collective struggle. This inherent tension contributes to the intensity that typifies their feminism more generally. Emphatically, the focus on the self is a positive one. Women insisted that unlike activists of the old generation, who allegedly were mostly attuned to their gender-based traumas, they want to put their desires at the center. Not ignoring their traumas, they want to celebrate life and bring their personal nuances into feminism; and as daughters of post-modern times, lavish consumption is quite characteristic of their lifestyles. True, many of the women we interviewed were committed to a critical politics of consumption, yet they seemed to have no qualms about the enjoyment component

of consumer culture. They go to cafes, take vacations abroad, dye their hair, and readily compliment one another on how good they look.

Claiming back the personal, refusing the identity boxes

In 1992, as a result of pressure from Mizrahi women activists, the national feminist conference adopted a thirds policy, which meant a commitment to equal self-representation of Mizrahi, Palestinian, and Ashkenazi women in all the conference's sessions. A year later this was adjusted to a quarters policy, to include lesbians too (Shiran, 2002). The quarters policy, which has since been adopted in many feminist platforms and organized activities, has become a local code name for a politics of pluralism and diversity, which is attuned to the intersection of gender, ethno-nationality, class, and sexuality. Echoing post-colonial feminist discourses elsewhere, the quarters discourse in Israel has challenged the tenet of universal sisterhood on the grounds that it serves the interests of the dominant (Jewish-Ashkenazi) group. Despite a general agreement and operative steps toward affirmative action within the movement, many of our interviewees, especially in Isha L'Isha, feel that the problem is far from being resolved, as the movement remains dominated by Jewish-Ashkenazi and/or highly educated women.

Still, 13 years or so into the implementation of the quarters policy, women who joined the movement after it began, including those who agree that racialized women do not get equal space, are worried about the tendency to reify and essentialize difference. Lamis, a Palestinian Muslim, says: "The quarters policy is a double-edged sword. It's important, but sometimes it becomes a goal in and of itself". Iris, who volunteered throughout her interview dramatic examples of exclusions of Mizrahiyot within Isha L'Isha was nevertheless disturbed by what she perceived as an excessive need "to push women into quarters". Others said that they "would like to go about in a world without definitions".

The most pressing motivation behind such reservations was women's desire to "define myself as I wish", to quote Nira again, or their insistence not to be reduced to one aspect of their identity. As mentioned, when we designed the research, we purposefully looked for interviewees from all four quarters. In the process, however, we sometimes found that women resisted our scheme, which they guessed even though we did not ask them explicitly to be interviewed as a lesbian/Mizrahit/..., etc. For example, Yuli, a 25-year-old woman whom we assumed was Ashkenazita and lesbian, was very reluctant to participate, because she resented being pushed into a 'quarter'. When eventually she did consent, she repeatedly expressed anger about the idea of quarters. In the part of the interview that asked about sexuality, she gave a somewhat bleak description of sexuality meaning, for her, "walking about with rape anxiety... being forced to consider what messages I allegedly give when I hitchhike... getting comments on my ass or my hairy legs... or being nagged about not being married and not having children." To this list of nuisances she then added "and these fucking quarters in Isha that force you to declare whether or not you are a lesbian. Someone even told me once, when I served on one of the committees, that I was chosen as a lesbian. This was really insulting... I refuse to be elected on the lesbian ticket." Another

reason to reject the quarters policy was the resentment of 'victim feminism'. Nira, a self-declared Mizrahit, said, "Feminism cultivates certain types of heroines, and women therefore need to fit into clear-cut squares, such as disempowered, abused, Mizrahit, etc."

So young feminist activists in Israel today tend to reject the identity boxes. But this position does not reflect a negation of power politics within the movement. In direct continuation with the previous themes of self-expression and the joy of their sexuality, they seem adamant to celebrate their subjectivity and agency, and to be as specific about it as they can.

Selfishness

A particularly intriguing aspect of the claims to the personal, an explicit celebration of selfishness, was quite widespread in the women's narratives. Several interviewees expressed appreciation, even admiration, of women who seemed to be looking after their own good, a behavior they regarded as quintessentially feminist. This theme was particularly prevalent among Arab and Mizrahi women, who resisted the traditional demands that others, notably their relatives, make on their services, earnings, and attention. They chose as their feminist role models an older sister or neighbor whom as young girls they had admired for daring to put themselves first through keeping their earnings to themselves, spending on clothes and beautiful things, and generally cultivating an air of self-centeredness. To a lesser degree some of the Ashkenazi women also talked about critical moments in their development, when they decided "to do something for myself".

It is noteworthy that despite their apparent 'contemporary sound', emphases on self-expression, reflexivity, and self-consciousness often apply across wider generational positions. It would be fair to say that among feminist activists in Israel today, the centrality of 'my voice' and 'my place', along with the quest for specificity in self-representation, are attributes of the time and not necessarily of the generational position. Still, unlike what is sometimes described in 'third-wave' literature (e.g., Mann & Huffman, 2005), the focus on the individual self does not seem to eclipse the activists' sense of the political as historical and collective. As Niveen put it:

Young women insist on bringing their personal space into the feminist discussion, and they don't do it from a place of oppression [read: from a sense of being oppressed]. That's their contribution. They are more empowered than their mothers' generation, and they want to talk about women's powers, not just their victimization.

Discussion

The narratives of young activists reveal an intense attachment to feminism as an ideology and a reference group, which is nevertheless fraught with tensions and seeming contradictions. They tend to take positions and express feelings, such as anger, selfishness, or lesbian erotic attraction, that are culturally illegitimate for women. At the same time, they also show inclinations, such as individualism, and again selfishness or self-centeredness, that are not normative for feminists within the movement. Consequently, their navigation of the different parts of their social worlds,

inside and outside the movement, requires a fair amount of emotion work. It is clear that a central motivating power for women to join the movement is to find meaning, identity, and community. Largely a result of the adaptability of patriarchal structures to feminist challenges over the past decades, the activists' quest to overturn the social order, while still relevant, is mostly not expected to be ultimately realized. Instead, fulfillment is derived from personal growth, for which feminism serves both as an inspiration and a bouncing surface. Interestingly, as we show shortly, such identity work entails a dual nature of resistance and attachment to the larger cultural environment, as the movement and its members are at once set against this cultural environment and embedded within it.

Navigating passages

The women's active grappling with feminist positions and interpretations shows that contrary to the popular stigma of feminists as dogmatic and zealous, young members tend to retain their independent thinking and cannot be taken for granted (see also [Hercus, 2005](#)). It also shows that while the movement is influential in shaping its members' distinct identity, it is not monopolistic in that. In their insistence on "bringing their personal space into the feminist discussion", as Neveen put it, young activists in effect reinforce the movement's attachment to the general culture around it. For one thing, women's quest to realize their authentic self or to register particular nuances within an ideological platform brings into the movement a distinctly contemporary, New Age cultural discourse ([Simhai, 2006](#)). Also their insistence on approaching social oppression with a sense of entitlement instead of victimization strongly echoes the New Age cultural motif of the self as mistress of her own destiny. In this respect, the non-feminist world "out there" is not unilaterally antithetic to the movement, which of course complicates the process of boundary maintenance. Instead, forging feminist subjectivities emerges as an ongoing process that is often very fulfilling yet also quite "ordinary" in its complexity and ambivalence. Concomitantly, feminism as a movement comes out as woven into the very cultural fabric that it seeks to unpick.

A local take on forbidden emotions

The tendency of feminism to cultivate emotions that are culturally forbidden for women has been discussed by several scholars. [Cheryl Hercus \(1999\)](#), for example, focused on the centrality of moral indignation and righteous anger in feminist collective action frames, and their contradictory outcomes. Within the movement, emotional framing has legitimated anger as an appropriate response to the oppression of women in patriarchal society and therefore served as an effective mobilizing tool for collective action. In all other spheres of the activists' lives, however, male-dominated culture constructs anger as a deviant emotion in women, leading them to invest emotion work in getting their feelings into line, so as not to "upset" their friends, parents, colleagues and acquaintances with their feminism. Hercus's Australian study supports findings from other studies in the USA ([Reger, 2004](#); [Taylor & Whittier, 1995](#)), according to which feminist organizations manage to channel "passive" negative emotions such as

depression and shame into "active" anger. It then adds to these studies a much needed reflection on the social costs of the seemingly effective mobilizing power of anger, by taking into consideration the embedded experience of activists in mixed feminist and non-feminist social worlds.

The Israeli case resonates strongly with the Australian findings of Cheryl Hercus, both in women's reports that they get hostile reactions when they say that they are feminist and, at the opposite end, in the sense of empowerment that they get out of their activism. The different strategies adopted by the activists in response to the general hostility to feminism again resemble those described by Hercus. While some of our interviewees talk feminism at work or at home, and are willing to be marked and pushed into a narrow stereotype, others systematically avoid expressing their anger, and feel lonely. In the specific Israeli context, though, the strong reaction to women's anger is amplified by yet another prevalent point of contention: a general distaste for the politicization of so-called "social" problems.

Studies of civil and social activism in Israel have shown that attempts to tackle contentious issues, primarily those related to ethnic, national, class, or gender relations, almost invariably invoke quarrels on whether the issue at hand is "political" or "social". [Amalia Sa'ar \(1998, 2006\)](#) argues that the labeling of an issue as "political" is locally considered tantamount to highlighting its conflictive components and bringing them closer to the surface. Habitually, activists who want to call controversial issues political insist that efficient civil action must acknowledge issues of power and domination. The counter-argument usually holds that anything "political" is tainted with interests, and that a constructive approach to touchy subjects must frame them as "social" or "apolitical", so as to create consensus rather than deepen divisions (see also [Al-Haj, 1995](#); [Simhai, 2006](#)). In the case of feminism, this cultural context renders the feminist tenet "the personal is political" doubly provocative, both because it inculcates active fury in subjects who are expected to be docile and because "the political" is initially already highly antagonistic.

Feminist as complex identity

As mentioned at the outset, feminist activism for young women in contemporary Israel is about identity and meaning-making as much as it is about social change. Particularly relevant here are the women's semantic struggles to politicize their personal histories without getting trapped in identity boxes that merely a decade or so earlier marked a most radical breakthrough in the struggle of "brown" and "pink" women to gain recognition within the movement. Not ignoring the importance of politicizing the relationships among women, young activists warn against their reification. Mostly, they refuse to be labeled and experience the effects of labeling as a new kind of silencing. "The political", in this respect, is put under scrutiny in more than one sense. As regards the dominant culture, "the personal is political" addresses a particular type of silencing and seeks to unmark male privileges as a fruit of their domination; but within the movement young activists name an opposite effect: the tendency of political-collective orientations to erase their personal concerns from the agenda. In a cultural atmosphere that hails individual autonomy, reflexivity, and self-expression, young activists want the movement to give

more room to their personal concerns and to accommodate their distinct individual voices.

Conclusion

For young feminist activists in Israel, consciousness, embodied knowledge, emotions, and actions form a contingent complex of personal and political engagements. Beside decisive motivation to act for social change, women use the movement as a supportive setting for identity work. This in turn calls for a fair amount of emotional boundary maintenance to mitigate out-group hostility to feminism, and in-group expectations to toe the collective line. Their striving for permission to be at once vulnerable and powerful, tender and flamboyant, entails a profile of multi-dimensional women, who cannot easily be molded into standard agents of collective action. Like fractals, those intertwined components of their subjectivities exhibit partial self-similarities through processes of repetition. This aspect of the individual members then projects a quality of dynamic integration onto the movement as a whole. The combination of women's sense of entitlement to "be themselves" with their commitment to collective action and to a larger ideological platform echoes a complex social reality, in which anti-patriarchal politics has become a permanent component of patriarchal settings.

Identity is an ongoing process. It develops continuously through women's membership, even if their engagement in organized collective action goes through periods of inactivity. This trajectory highlights an important contemporary characteristic of the feminist process of social change. While it is anchored to a movement, with a platform and an apparatus, it tends to brew inwardly in individuals over extended, probably lifelong periods. Not that social change can be reduced to a simple accumulation of individual discoveries. Women clearly testified that belonging to a group and feeding on its elaborate ideology played a decisive role in their individual journeys. Rather, the center of the social-change process seems to have shifted, so that organized action, even radical, yields and operates in tandem with individualized, micro-level subsidiaries. Inevitably, such developments deepen the embedment of feminism within the cultural order it initially set out to revolutionize.

To go back, in conclusion, to some of the theoretical debates that were mentioned in the [Introduction](#), this article clearly accords with recent criticisms within New Social Movement Theory in showing how a social movement can be fueled at once by individual searches for identity and meaning, and by collective organizing and resource mobilization. With respect to feminist movements more specifically, we take issue with the dictum that "the personal is political", and its more recent, though by now well established outgrowth, namely the understanding that ethnic, class, or racial (in our case national) relations are relevant also inside the movement. We have presented a localized understanding of the ways in which the "political" can be provocative and hence potentially transformative, and offered to see the personal and the political as dynamic and mutually informing. With respect to the second issue, the case presented here reinforces recent articulations (e.g., [Hercus, 2005](#)) of feminist subjectivities as more rounded and complex than they tend to appear in identity politics narratives. Finally, this case high-

lights how women's agency operates at one and the same time within and outside the movement, and the paradoxical effects that ensue when feminist, including radical feminist politics, is practiced by late-modern, reflexive subjects.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the women who participated in the interviews and focus groups for their openness and trust. Interpretations of the narratives are entirely our responsibility. We also thank Murray Rosovsky for his editing of the manuscript.

Endnotes

¹ For parallel developments among Palestinians in the first half of the twentieth century, see [Fleischmann \(2003\)](#).

² As a corollary to the discrimination against the Palestinian citizens, the sums available to NGOs that operate among them are significantly lower than those operating among Jews (see [Bank of Israel, 2006](#), pp. 25–26).

³ All the names and identifying details below have been changed.

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