

Impact of Children on Mothers' Activism and Vice Versa: *Insights from an Examination of Oral Histories with Israeli Mothers, Summer 1999*

This article suggests that motherhood might be radicalizing. It derives from follow-up I did with women activists in Palestine/Israel after an initial oral history research project¹ I carried out at the height of the *Intifada*, up through and immediately after the Persian Gulf War, between 1989 and 1992.² I explore the controversial area of children's impact on mothers' activism, and then suggest a possible direction of the influence a mothers' activism has on their children.

I found evidence in women's life stories to contradict traditional stereotypical notions expressed elsewhere that women having children is an impediment to political activism, making them conservative in the interest of protecting their homes. Although I did find some evidence of this commonly asserted reality, I also found some evidence of the social construction of protest³ stemming directly from the mothering role. For example, the need to protect their children from impending danger and induction into the army can radicalize some women.⁴ This radicalism might even extend to mobilizing other women and consequently having an impact on national and international life as women, as activists, and as feminists.

Additionally, contrary to traditional views that children might feel abandoned and neglected by their mothers' turns towards political work, I saw evidence to suggest that children may benefit from exposure to other possible roles for women, thus leading to a normalization of women's agency. Furthermore, their mother's activism might even stimulate the children themselves to engage in political activism of their own.

Thus, either having children or being a child of an activist can become a basis for cognitive liberation, or a transformational consciousness that propels participants into collective action.⁵

Four mothers: Emergence of a collective activist identity from the context of mothering

The first interview I will examine reveals the emergence of a collective identity as a result of repeated shared definitions⁶ in this context of mothering. The interviewee was a woman aged 46 in the summer of 1999, whom I spoke with over a tape recorder in a restaurant outside her *kibbutz* in the northwest part of the country, near the border of Lebanon. After listening to the tape and jotting down further questions, I followed up with several phone calls after significant dates had passed of which she had made me aware.⁷ Ronit Nahmias had four children. She was born in Algeria but had immigrated to France in 1961 at the end of the war, after independence, because “it was impossible to stay there” (1). She lived in Paris until 1969 when she moved to Israel with her parents and two brothers. She and her husband, with two children, had been placed on the *kibbutz* where she continue to live as her husband was a teacher and basketball player and the *kibbutz* was looking for some one to train children. They decided to stay as they knew they could work and raise their children, giving to community and getting so much in return (1). Later, she had twins, two girls. At the time of the interview, she had three daughters and a son. The eldest (the boy) was 22 years old and finished with the army.

Ronit considered herself a feminist. She first became aware of the women’s movement when she was pregnant with her twins and had participated in street rituals with Women in Black. Her mother had become critical of her activism, calling her crazy. Nonetheless, Ronit decided to remain active and assumed leadership of a group she founded, called Four Mothers. This group was dedicated to promoting the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon. It was formed spontaneously when she spoke with a friend who also had a son in the army. They were concerned when a plane crashed in a border skirmish, on Feb. 4, 1997, and they knew the soldier who was killed as he was in the same group/class as their own sons. The young soldier’s death brought mothers of the boys’ peers closer. As Ronit relates, “we thought, this time we were lucky but it can happen (to our children) tomorrow or the day after tomorrow” (3). They decided to do something about a situation that could potentially endanger each of their sons. “It was terrible,” Ronit said. “It was a nightmare. We thought this war had no purpose. We don’t do anything. We just send the children who are killed, but we will never win because it’s a guerilla war. Why do we stay? We want to transcend” (3). They embarked upon a path of raising cultural challenges to the codes that organize information and shape social practices.⁷

Thus, the impact of having a child—in this case, a son—on Ronit as a mother, as well as her friend who was in the same situation, was that it led her to question the role of the army. The loss of a belief in the system’s legitimacy propelled Ronit, her friend, and two other mothers to demand change. They contacted members of Parliament, met with them, and when they eventually becoming frustrated with dealing through regular channels, they developed a new sense of political efficacy. They experienced the contradiction of Zionist

ideology that claims the state is there for protection of its citizens, with the reality of their position as mothers who desire to protect their children. Dialectically, this contradiction within hegemonic forces led the women to eventually become disillusioned with, and to challenge, the state and other aspects of civil society, indicting the entire state apparatus.

Originally, the women had felt that speaking as mothers would give them more weight as they were pressuring members of Parliament out of no ulterior (read: party) motive. They felt that rather than expressing an interest in partisan politics, that the motivation to protect their children, perceived to arise out of mothers' "natural" urge to care for their offspring, would earn them respect. Much to their surprise, the press began to ridicule them for being stupid, emotional women who should rather "go to the kitchen" (5). As a result, they resolved to continue to resist the government, refusing to believe that because their sons had to join the army at the age of 18, that they as mothers should give up and give the army permission to do whatever they wanted with them. They responded instead by studying the subject of the conflict in Lebanon. By listening and reading, they started to become aware of different interpretations of the conflict and found there were differing opinions within the army itself. Therefore, rather than being an impediment to their personal development, being mothers (of sons in the army) had a secondary impact that led to their increasing political awareness and understanding of the issues.

The women discovered in their research that secret plans had been made under the table, that even officers within the army were recommending withdrawal from Lebanon, and that there was no other way to solve the problem. Although they discovered rational army officers, and not just "stupid" mothers, also had their ideas rejected, the women did not want to ally with one political party or another to force the issue. They began to articulate the principle that the government should be honest and level with the people. They began to utilize pressure forces such as the governmental Commission on the Status of Women (composed of women across the party spectrum), national petition campaigns, street demonstrations and rituals, letters to Parliament, television news coverage, and meetings with the Prime Minister. The women found themselves propelled to a level of political sophistication. As a direct result of their maternal urge to protect their children, these women were propelled to an increasingly higher level of political sophistication. They became the locus of expression of national concern, and received thousands of phone calls of support from across the country. They began to organize meetings with people on a national level, and this spread to small groups organizing everywhere in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem that took their cues from the Four Mothers' activities.

Ronit had been an activist as a teenager (age 16) during demonstrations that took place during the student uprising in Paris in 1968. However, it wasn't until she understood that her son might be killed for nothing (11) that she began to express concerns that led her once again into politics, having lost her

faith in the processes of democracy. From there, she began to generalize that around the world, perhaps women can do things, even if they do not always understand the impact of their actions or the action of their governments all at once. She concluded that as women:

... we have something. We are very strong...women have the strength to go on, and do what they believe, even if its not something connected to them, or understood... We have inner corroboration. We can do things together. All these movements are living because women are living. (11)

Thus a final impact of Ronit's children on her life was her transformation into an international feminist.⁸ She moved from outrage, to attempts to channel through legitimate processes, and to frustration at responses from legitimate sources. She then took matters into her own hands, became educated, and discovered through the organization of women's study groups that there was a difference of opinion on the inside of governmental structures. She became a national spokesperson, spearheading demonstrations in 20 places across the country on a regular basis for two years, 1997 through 1998, and discovered her own strength and the strength of other women to work ceaselessly for political change. She ended up by concluding that it would be valuable to have a women's party, a very radical idea in Israel. To commemorate their spontaneous actions, they planted 200 trees along the border with Lebanon. In changing the country (as the withdrawal was eventually accomplished) she too was changed.

New profile: Taking leadership in response to sons' avoidance of the army

Although only one lifeline, Ronit's narrative represents the similar flow of stories of other women. For example, Ruth Hiller began to take leadership as an activist when her son said he didn't want to go to the army. His statement was unexpected, although she had been an active in Women in Black protesting the Occupation in earlier years before having to leave the organization in order to fulfill childcare and family obligations. Her son's confession led her to founding a national group and getting extensive coverage in local and national media in Israel, thus also having an impact on the imagination of others to "come out" and express similar concerns and support (22). As a teenager, Ruth had also been active in the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement in the U.S. where she grew up. However, it was the impact of her son's unwillingness to enter the army that motivated her to take a leadership role in the founding of new movements of change to alter the frame of national collective consciousness. His confession led her to talk to other mothers, whose sons also did not want to go into the army. Similar to Ronit, Ruth's response to concerns about one of her children resulted in her leading a national organization that could apply pressure on the state as a group. Ruth's goal was different, however. Her group was focused on allowing conscientious objectors



Ronit Nabmias, founder of Four Mothers

to serve undersome sort of legal status instead of going to fight in the army. This group took the name New Profile.

Like the women in Ronit's organization, the women in New Profile contacted Parliamentary leaders, wrote to the Prime Minister, and so on, a strategy originally formulated as a platform by a group she started working with, Women and Mothers for Peace. Ruth, was also motivated by the impact of her son's confession to start a study group on conscription. She came to the conclusion that "we understood as women, that the only way we could get things changed was to get up and do it" (13). Ruth also had a radical mother's point of view that transformed her into a feminist. As Ruth explained, "the men were brainwashed because that was part of the military. If it wasn't coming from a mother's point of view, we have got to stop the bloodshed, then we can never stop" (13). She was successful in organizing a conference of 150 people to bring conscription under national scrutiny.

However, Ruth suffered terrible personal pain and political disillusionment. The *kibbutz* on which she lived organized a protest against her in October of 1998, in front the *kibbutz* club house where the group was trying to meet, with signs such as "We Won't Let Auschwitz Happen Again" (14). As a mother organizing on behalf of her son Ruth didn't feel that her activism had anything to do with Auschwitz. However, she didn't feel that the protest group would listen to reason, or even talk to her group which was calling for a re-examination of conscription. The group moved its conference off the *kibbutz*, but a rift between Ruth and her immediate social environment had nonetheless occurred. The protest had placed an obstacle in the path of Ruth's group who were trying to bridge public discourse and experiential action with an integrative



Women demonstrating for peace in Jerusalem.

framework that could sustain collective action.⁹ Nevertheless, a national structure grew out of that conference and the nuclei of people who signed up to work on committees. Subsequently, Ruth felt it was easier to converse with her son's classmates than with the parents of his classmates on the *kibbutz*, who were actually her immediate peers.

In addition to experiencing disillusionment with her immediate social world, Ruth experienced disillusionment with traditional peace movements within Israeli society and even with the Israeli Union of Civil Liberties that refused to support her son's case or other cases like his. Yet, like Ronit, she was propelled into international activism when outside of Israel groups such as The War Resisters League began to lend support to New Profile's efforts to change conscription law, to humanize the army, and to demilitarize society. Like Ronit, Ruth was compelled to engage in extensive research on her own and with other women. She discovered a wealth of internal resources. As Ruth put it, "what motivates me is my madness. My need and this conviction." Her biggest fear was that her son would have to spend some time in jail. Her son had resigned himself to this possibility; the son of another activist was going to jail for the same reason and had received positive national coverage and international recognition.

Nonetheless, Ruth herself felt that the worst thing that could happen to him besides death and/or illness would be to face imprisonment (19). Thus, the impacts of her child on this mother were manifold. Being a mother stimulated her activism, brought out her leadership abilities, led her to the brink of disillusionment with the status quo, and forced her to get in touch with and to mobilize her own increasing strength to face her internal fears. She also became

a feminist as all but one member of the organization were women. In spite of his presence, the group held on to its feminism, Ruth said, because “women want to be the ones to decide. Many are active in the organization and have a lot of input and a lot of experience. There is something in being female that says we don’t want war any more. This is really making peace” (21). New Profile is known and respected for its egalitarianism, which is regarded as a positive factor in the movement, as important as the general values expressed and the everyday stories told in charting movement culture.¹⁰ Everyone is doing their share, as “there is a common interest and a common goal ... that thing of motherhood is what binds us together. It’s unbelievable ... we want to keep our kids alive” (22).

Ruth, too, felt her identity as a woman had changed as a result of the activities that she took on because she was the mother of a victimized and potentially endangered son. As Ruth put it, “I was really afraid to say what I felt. You are brought up because you are a woman, especially when it comes to the question of the military, to say you don’t know enough, you weren’t equal. You were made to feel inferior...”(24). This was a feeling that, forced into activism by virtue of being a mother, she contradicted and overcame.

Women and mothers for peace: Earning respect from husbands and sons as activists

Although Dita Azene, another activist in one of the spin-off groups of the same period in Tel Aviv, Women and Mothers for Peace, did not support re-examination of conscription or the use of the word “mothers” in their name, she felt that she earned the respect of both her sons and her husband for her activities as “the peace activist in the family.” Her sons came to the demonstrations that she organized and attended. Although she didn’t consider herself a feminist as the other mothers I refer to here did, she participated in Women in Black as well as in all the demonstrations with Palestinians, because she “wanted to touch the women and to end the occupation, to help” (1). She became friends with Palestinians through her activism, and she felt her life change through her activism because she became more “like a human being” (4), not like a Jewish mother who merely cooked food. Although not she did not identify as a feminist, she was more comfortable with women because she thought they worked better together as a group, than did men. Women, she felt, were also more willing to be visible. Thus, through her activism, Dita altered the image of women she conveyed to her sons, and provided them with a different view of womanhood. She, too, began to appear in the *Jerusalem Post*, when Women and Mothers for Peace took out an ad for peace on behalf of the destiny of the children in Israeli society. Her home, also, was deluged with phone calls (6). The impact this had on her sons was to provide them with a generalized concern and care for *all*, which goes beyond an individual mother’s care for her own biological offspring. Dita feels as a woman that she is impacting on history, and that her actions challenge the more traditional

societal ideas about the role of women, and the limitation of their agency, which might otherwise be perpetuated by her sons.

Conclusions

In conclusion, more work needs to be done.¹¹ Nonetheless it can be seen from these few examples that the children impacted on the mothers by propelling them to action, while the action of the mothers inspired alternate visions of women and activism, in turn impacting on their children. As I mentioned, one of the sons of one of the other women I interviewed was receiving national and international coverage for refusing to go into the army, while I was there (Raz, 1999). The son had grown up in a household where his mother was always demonstrating for peace, participating in the Women in Black demonstrations, and later writing a platform for educating educators and parents to bring up children for peace and not for violence which she was circulating in the *Knesset*. Because this particular young man's mother had had numerous newspaper coverage and national interviews while he was raised, it helped him come to the logical conclusion that he should not go to the army to fight at all. Thus, his life of protest can be perceived as a direct outgrowth of his mother's political activism.

Consequently, the positive impact of children on women's activism, and, in turn, of mothers' activism on children, even if not they do not always bring about these same results, should not be overlooked in future analysis. Political action arising out of the need to protect one's own children may be generalized to a fight for larger social concerns in the long run, as has been evidenced in developments in the women's peace movement in Palestine/Israel.¹²

From examining these few life stories, we can see that consciousness, as William A. Gamson suggests in an essay called "Social Psychology of Collective Action" concerns "the mesh between cognition and culture—between individual beliefs about the social world and the cultural belief systems and ideologies" (1992: 65). To understand people's willingness to be quiescent or to engage in collective action requires an understanding of political consciousness as an active process of constructing meaning. Parenting, and specifically mothering, can play a part in this. Researchers in the future might explore the impact of women's children on their motivation to engage in collective action over time, to publicly take positions that might seem to counter nationalist understandings that might otherwise be in effect in areas of long-term violent strife and war.

¹¹This research was conducted with the support of a faculty start-up grant from Cleveland State University, and with additional support from John Holm, Director of International Programs at CSU, to whom I am greatly indebted in numerous ways. For results of the earlier research see Weinbaum (forthcoming, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1998).

²See Klandermans (1992) for discussion of frameworks for analysis of social construction of protest generated over the last ten years by students of social movements, to which I suggest here that the dialectic of tension in the mother's role and social location be added.

³Similarly, Hanks-Harwood (2000) found that 67 per cent of her interviews with women peace activists in the U.S. in the 1980s cited the desire to protect children as a motivating force bringing them to political activism.

⁴For analysis of the possible steps in transformation of consciousness, see McAdam (1988). He proposes first the loss of legitimacy; second, the loss of fatalism; and third, development of a new sense of political efficacy. See also Klandermans (1992).

⁵New social movement theorists view collective identity as such to help distinguish between "doing" and "being." See Taylor and Whittier (1992:117).

⁶For example, I called her after a planned trip by the women to try to speak to somebody in *Knesset*, and then again after certain news events to get her subsequent responses.

⁷See Melucci (1995) on how those involved in such conflicts reclaim autonomy and agency in making sense of their lives.

⁸Such personal transformation has been central to most social movements. See Morris (1984); Fantasia (1988); McNall (1988).

⁹See Gamson (1995) on the importance of monitoring media discourse that such obstacles created for activists involve.

¹⁰See Lofland (1995: 192) regarding implicit features of social life and explicit social construction of cultures in political movements.

¹¹For example, the incidents of impact of children on mothers' activism here have been the influence of sons. Aliyah Strauss, another activist, described the impact of her daughter. Aliyah, at the time of the interview president of the Israeli chapter of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, had been active for many years around Palestinian/Israeli peace issues. This activism for peaceful coexistence began when her husband experienced conflict and disorientation during his reserve. When I asked Aliyah how she had first been exposed to feminism, she discussed the issue of *Ms. Magazine* her daughter had sent her from the States explaining that it had opened her eyes to the sex-role stereotyping in children's literature.

¹²See for example a communication from Ruth Hiller (2000) which explains an amalgamation of Women in Black, Four Mothers, New Profile, Women and Mothers for Peace, and *Bat Shalom* putting forth slogans such as "We did not get our boys out of Lebanon to die defending settlements." Not mentioned here are two women who came from the Christian Peace Teams working actively in occupied territories as human shields. Ruth wrote that on Wednesday (8 November 2000), a group of 40 women met in Tel-Aviv. They came from five women's peace movements in Israel—Four Mothers, Women in Black, Bat Shalom, Mothers and Women for Peace, and New Profile. They had the blessings of women from other peace movements who could not attend—

Women for the Sanctity of Life, Women for Women Political Prisoners, *Tandi*, and WILPF. Although they had come from all these organizations, they spoke as individuals, and their words did not necessarily reflect the views of our organizations. They sat for over three hours and accomplished the following: "1) We learned of each other's initiatives for peace and agreed to support them by attending and mobilizing others to attend. 2) We created a network of contacts around the country for information and coordination. 3) We argued about whether to take a more radical or a moderate position—based on our beliefs and on what "the situation" calls for. 4) And we wrote our first joint statement, which was faxed to all the local and foreign press this morning.... While we may never agree on the politics or the strategy, we enthusiastically agreed that we must continue this network. It is not our intention to replace any other activity. We want to support each other in the work we are doing, foster new initiatives, and perhaps also undertake some joint action. Our provisional name for ourselves: Women for a Just Peace. The Age of Generals is Over—The Time for Women Has Come!" The following was the final statement of a conference of women from a diverse range of organizations, held in Tel-Aviv on Wednesday, 8 November 2000: "We refuse to support men or women who do military service in the occupied territories. Enough killing and being killed in the defense of settlements! We did not get our children out of Lebanon so they could be sent to fight for Netzarim and Hebron."

References

- Azene, Dita. (1999). Personal Interview. Tel Aviv, Israel, August 8.
- Fantasia, Rick. (1988). *Cultures of Solidarity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gamson, William. (1995). "Constructing Social Protest." *Social Movements and Culture*. Eds. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 85-106.
- Gamson, William. (1992). "The Social Psychology of Collective Action." *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClung Mueller. New Haven: Yale University Press. 53-74.
- Hanks-Harwood, Ginger. (2000). "Motherhood and Motivation to Reach Activism: A Lesson from the 1980s." Paper presented at "Mothering and Fathering: Visioning, Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Peace." The Association for Research on Mothering Fourth Annual International Conference. November 4. Cardinal Stritch University. Milwaukee, WI.
- Hiller, Ruth. (1999). Personal Interview. Kibbutz Haogen, Israel, August 15.
- Hiller, Ruth. (2000). Personal Communication, November 10.
- Johnston, Hank and Bert Klandermans. (1995). Eds. *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Klandermans, Bert. (1992). "The Social Construction of Protest and Multi-

- Klandermans, Bert. (1992). "The Social Construction of Protest and Multi-organizational Fields." *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClung Mueller. New Haven: Yale University Press. 73-103.
- Lofland, John. (1995). "Charting Degrees of Movement Culture: Tasks of the Cultural Cartographer." *Social Movements and Culture*. Eds. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 188-216.
- McAdam, Dog, et al. (1988). "Social Movements." *Handbook of Sociology*. Ed. Neil J. Smelser. Berkeley Hills, CA. Sage.
- McNall, Scott G. (1988). *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Populism 1865-1900*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Melucci, Alberto. (1995). "The Process of Collective Identity." *Social Movements and Culture*. Eds. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 41-63.
- Morris, Aldon D. (1984). *The Origin of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Free.
- Morris, Aldon D. and Carol McClung Mueller, Eds. (1992). *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Nachmias, Ronit. (1999). Personal Interview. Kibbutz Gadot, Israel, July 22.
- Raz, Nomi. (1999). Personal Interview. Jerusalem, Israel, July 25.
- Strauss, Aliyah. (1999). Personal Interview. Jaffa, Israel, August 16.
- Taylor, Verta and Nancy E. Whittier. (1992). "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities." *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClung Mueller. New Haven: Yale University Press. 104-129.
- Weinbaum, Batya. (forthcoming). "Searching for Peace on Hostile Land: Narrative from the Field, Palestine/Israel, 1989-1992." *Lost on the Map of the World: Jewish Women Writers' Quest for Home*. Eds. Phillipa Kafka and Warren Hoffman. Forthcoming, Lang.
- Weinbaum, Batya. (1999a). "The American Feminist Concept of Motherhood: Test Practice in Israel as Evaluated Through Oral History Research." *Frontiers* 20 (2): 87-101.
- Weinbaum, Batya. (1999b). "Challenges to Feminist Internationalism in Palestine/Israel." *The Journal of Progressive Judaism* 12: 29-55.
- Weinbaum, Batya. (1999c, Winter). "Narrative vs. Historical Truth: Insights from Fieldwork in Right-wing Popular Consciousness in Israel." *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 2(1).
- Weinbaum, Batya. (1998, Summer). "Shifting Gears in Life History Research: The Case of an Assimilated American Jewish Woman in Palestine/Israel 1989-91." *Biography* 21 (3): 301-17.