



It was a Zionist act: Feminist politics of single-mother policy votes in Israel ☆

Anat Herbst ^{a,b}, Orly Benjamin ^b

^a Open University, Israel

^b Bar-Ilan University, Israel

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SYNOPSIS

The notion “political opportunity structure” serves feminist scholarship to analyze the conditions under which achievements are gained in the realm of social policy. This framework has drawn attention to the configurations of access to state institutions, stability of political alignments and relationships with allies. Using this framework, we examine whether Israeli parliamentary feminists relied on a political opportunity structure in two historical periods in the shaping of Israeli social policy regarding allowances to single mothers. Our analysis shows that feminist MPs created a political opportunity structure in 1992 by left–right cooperation and a third discourse, in between the misery discourse and the rights discourse, constituting single mothers as Zionists. In 2002, feminist MPs maintained left–right cooperation but have not developed an in-between discourse. We argue that, in neo-liberal times, feminist parliamentary activism has to become more sophisticated by using discursive leverage to create political opportunities in order to protect past achievements.

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Introduction

The current social policy in Israel regarding state support for single-parent households is the result of two major legal actions: feminist mobilization that successfully promoted the 1992 Single-Parent Families Law and the neo-liberal modification of this law introduced by the Ministry of Finance in 2002. The 1992 law was the first statutory declaration of the single-parent family in Israel and established its social rights. The 2002 economic reform was a policy change that took place outside public debate, demonstrating the neo-liberal normativity that was dominant in the Finance Ministry.

Earlier commentators (Ajzenstadt & Gal, 2001) surveyed the 1992 Single-Parent Families Law within the context of other Israeli legislation establishing women's rights, but did not point to the exceptionality of this legislation as the outcome of feminist politics. Like historical legislation in the areas of maternity leave, child-care services and old age insurance for housewives, the 1992 law has been considered

a piece of legislation that had little effect in terms of challenging gender inequalities. We depart from this neglect of the feminist effort involved and examine parliamentary feminist activism through a discourse analysis of public speeches at the time of the 1992 (and the 2002) legislation.

We use this analysis to examine the ways in which feminist politics successfully utilized a political opportunity structure for political influence when constituting single mothers as a legal category, but have not recruited a similar political opportunity structure in 2002. The question we pose is this: if, following O'Connor and colleagues (O'Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999), women-oriented public policy is developed and embraced by exploiting political structures of opportunity, and if, as O'Connor (1998) explains, the less visible and less accountable budgeting policies are responsible for changes in social policy, what measures may assist in recruiting a political opportunity structure for protecting past achievements from neo-liberal cuts in the allocation of allowances? By directing attention to the ways in which feminist politicians have been using discourses related to single mothers' rights, we can shed light on this question, clarifying the connection between available discourses and their political deployment.

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Following Lazar (2005), as a feminist discourse analyst of the dialog between opposing discourses, we propose to focus not only on the social forces that operate as allies for the women's movement, but also on any discursive leverage (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006) that becomes instrumental in the mobilization of allies. Whereas existing studies tend to emphasize traditional allies, such as unions, we are particularly interested in the recruitment of non-traditional allies, such as right-wing politicians. We consider this practice crucial for making political gains under anti-welfare governments.

State policy for breadwinning moms

It is common knowledge (Lewis & Hobson, 1997) that raising children in low-income marriages or out of wedlock is a poverty risk factor for women. The social construction of gender roles and control over material resources is responsible for covert poverty and financial dependency inside and outside marriage (Korpi, 2000; McLanahan, Casper, & Sorensen, 1995; Pahl, 1988). Women's labor market precariousness (Vosko, Macdonald, & Campbell, 2009) reproduces single mothers' economic inferiority and, in turn, reinforces the normative heterosexual, monogamous model of the family (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999).

Feminist scholars argue that reducing poverty among single mothers requires state commitment to expand gender equality. Such commitment can be demonstrated through any combination of the following: providing quality jobs (above minimum wage, with pension and health entitlements) suitable for mothers; applying a universal policy for all families with children, including family allowances; offering publicly funded day-care centers and a long school day for all children; and providing services for the elderly (Christopher, England, Smeeding, & Ross Phillips, 2002; Kilkey, 2000; Lister, 1994; Millar, 1996). In the context of growing neo-liberal welfare regimes, such measures tend to be replaced by selective allowances (based on mean tests) that commonly deprive recipients of a stable income (Korpi & Palme, 1998).

Previous research has analyzed the institutionalization of women's and mothers' rights and their public images as consumers of welfare services and allowances (e.g. Helman, 2011). Our study advances this research interest through discourse analysis; specifically, we aim to facilitate the understanding of how particular discourses become important in generating a political opportunity structure that supports increased state commitment to single mothers. In connecting discourse analysis to the political arena, we focus on feminist politicians' use of discourses. Although such politicians have been working on these issues for quite a while, their struggles against these processes is often recognized as limited. For example, Banaszak and colleagues (Banaszak, Beckwith, & Rucht, 2003) argue that, in many First World countries, women's movements remained low key with respect to welfare reforms (see also Mink, 1998). The authors do not attribute this weakened power to feminist political forces, but rather to reconfigurations in the state apparatus and in state-civil society relations. Nevertheless, they argue that women's movements have not completely lost their power during neo-liberalization. Likewise, in Latin America, Craske

(1998) describes how, during state reconfigurations, women's movements gained both political representation and beneficial institutional changes, including women's ministries, women's offices in public sector organizations and some gender equality-oriented legislation. These achievements are not limited to Latin America (Randall, 1998), suggesting that issues understood as women's issues continue to mobilize feminists despite the reconfiguring of states and processes changing political opportunities (Banaszak et al., 2003). Our aim, therefore, is to explore the attempts of feminist politicians to utilize political opportunity structures in order to assess how specific discourses enable feminist political influence.

Meyer and Minkoff (2004) have presented a thorough review of attempts to apply Tarrow's (1983, 1994) notion of political opportunity structure, which has been embraced by scholars of feminism and the state (e.g., O'Connor, 1996, 1998; Randall, 1998; Sperling, 1998). They insist that diverse applications must be distinguished by introducing the question: political opportunity for what? Further, they argue that the opening and closing of the political opportunity structure should not be understood as subject to external forces alone, but rather as shaped within the interaction between opportunity, mobilization and political influence. Following this line of reasoning, we focus on how parliamentary feminists actively generate an opening of the political opportunity structure and on what resources are needed to deflect a possible closing.

O'Connor et al. (1999: 202–203) investigated changes in the political arena for feminist politicians by means of an analytical framework conceptualizing five dimensions in the political opportunity structure: feminist mobilization; anti-feminist mobilization; party configuration; social forces understood as political allies to the women's movement (traditionally, unions); and the institutional context. Of these five dimensions, the one that is perhaps most amenable to the influence of interaction is that of social allies, as these can be recruited using discursive measures. In order to include this possibility in our own framework, we propose to trace the application of discursive leverage, i.e., the use of less progressive discourses to mobilize ad hoc support. Non-traditional allies, such as right-wing politicians and Members of Parliament, can be particularly significant once they agree to vote for a pro-welfare policy. This practice may be crucial for making political gains under anti-welfare governments.

The Israeli case

Israeli commentators have argued that welfare policies supportive of women between the 1950s and the 1990s aimed at serving national-demographic orientations rather than gender equality (Ajzenstadt & Gal, 2001). The encouragement of Jewish (preferably middle-class) mothers' fertility is widely seen as the real motivation behind legislation securing women's entitlement to paid birth leaves and birth allowances (Berkovitch, 1999; Izraeli, 1992).

Local feminist organizations have mobilized their efforts over the years to minimize the price paid by Israeli women for their secondary-earner status and indeed Stier (2009) report significant proportion of dual-earner households in Israel: 64% of Jewish and 20% of Arab households, of them 34% contribute equally to the household income. Feminist efforts

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