**Feminists for Peace: The Struggle against Netanyahu**

From Alexandra Senfft

"Crime Minister" is one of the slogans with which thousands of Israelis have been demonstrating several times a week since mid-July in many Israeli towns and cities, but above all in front of the Prime Minister's official residence in Jerusalem's Balfour Street. They are demanding nothing less than the resignation of the Prime Minister, who is on trial for corruption. The protests also reflect anger over the government's miserable crisis management in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Israel is in the middle of a second wave of infection and the virus is driving up unemployment. The demonstrators are persistent and they show new qualities: spontaneous, creative and above all feminine. Women are clearly the driving force of the movement currently calling for change. "Israel needs a mother" or "A woman in leadership" read some of the signs.

"We are not organized and have no hierarchies," explains Sahar M. Vardi, one of the activists. Recently, many women have used their bodies as means of expressing protest: "Mother protectors" form human chains to protect the demonstrators from the police. Dressed as Superwoman, a woman climbed onto a water cannon to hinder its use against the protesters. A filmmaker from Tel Aviv, insulted by a man as a leftist with unshaven armpits, drove him away by showing him completely different hair: the hair under her skirt.

Showing off one's genitals and other colorful creative actions make headlines[[1]](#footnote-1) and confuse a society strongly influenced by chauvinism and the military. The demonstrations have gone far beyond criticism of the Prime Minister, also criticizing police violence, violence against women or the occupation of the West Bank. "Many of us demonstrators combine different political concerns, and we want to initiate a sustained discourse about the essence of our democracy," explains 30-year-old Vardi. The Jerusalemite refused military service in 2008 and spent five months in prison for it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Discontent from the center of society*

But the wave of protest has also affected mainstream citizens who have never taken to the streets before but are now out there performing their displeasure. A representative survey conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute in July 2020 found that 58 percent of those surveyed supported the demonstrations. In contrast, only 38 percent are optimistic about the future of the state's democracy, while 54 percent are pessimistic about its preservation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Meanwhile, Netanyahu is sneering and directs standard accusations at the demonstrators, portraying them as hostile lefties and anarchists. His son Yair, who has often attracted attention for his misogynistic and racist remarks, even mocked the Feminist demonstrators as "aliens", as extraterrestrials.[[4]](#footnote-4) He published the addresses of activists on Twitter and called for protests in front of their homes, a step which was eventually banned by a court.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nevertheless, the expressions of resistance have not left the Prime Minister unmoved, which is evident among other things in harsh police reactions, including intensive use of water cannons, dozens of arrests and riding into demonstrating crowds on horseback.

The new protest movement has the potential to initiate a political paradigm shift, especially since it involves many young Israelis who are those most affected by unemployment, estimates Sahar M. Vardi: "We are confronting our highly militarized society with femininity and working for democracy for all.” The new movement is not a singular or isolated example of this effort: Israel has an impressive number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and movements that work for equality, human rights and peace.[[6]](#footnote-6) They pursue different approaches and focus in particular on marginalized and weakened parts of the population, such as Jews from Ethiopia or from the former Soviet Union, Mizrachim (Jews originating in Muslim countries and Africa) as well as Palestinian citizens, Druze or Bedouins. Women have long played a significant role in this process, but their commitment has not yet gained entry into the top leadership roles and positions, where they remain severely underrepresented. In politics in particular, there is a huge gap between the grassroots and the decision-makers - only a quarter of the 120 Knesset members are women[[7]](#footnote-7) - and so far, the comprehensive efforts of women's grassroots movements have little resonance there.

Many NGOs aim to reduce this discrepancy: They work to support the entry of more women into top-leadership levels and to bring about a cultural change of heart. At present, however, many of the activists observe with concern that the government is taking advantage of the pandemic to make greater use of the military, as if Corona were an enemy of war. As military crisis management takes on more and more civilian tasks and issues, accelerating militarization feeds rises in violence against women. Soldiers were deployed, for example, in Corona hotspots to help contain contagion, military personnel provided information regarding the virus every evening on television, and an ex-officer was given responsibility for organizing contact tracing. The secret service, the Shin Beit, normally busy monitoring suspected Palestinian terrorists, also began tracking citizens' cell phones, using the same technology and without any legal basis. In this context, on Holocaust Memorial Day Netanyahu resorted to his usual collection of tropes, stating: "Unlike our response during Holocaust, this time we recognize the danger in time."[[8]](#footnote-8)

To combat Covid-19, the prime minister set up the National Security Council, which reports directly to his office. Initially, only men, mostly from the military, sat on the council of experts, which operated in a completely non-transparent manner. Through her organization "Itach-Maaki[[9]](#footnote-9), Women Lawyers for Social Justice," the lawyer Netta Loevy filed a petition to the High Court of Justice to instruct the government to fulfill its duty in accordance with UN Resolution 1325 and Israeli law and include women on the council. With success: After the first corona wave, a second team of experts was formed, in which women were even a majority, including a Palestinian Israeli woman and a woman from the ultra-Orthodox community. Up until that point, women's concerns had been completely ignored, although they are among those who suffer most from the restrictions meant to contain the Covid-19 virus, in both their private and professional life. Meanwhile, however, Netanyahu has once again convened a new team, it too without women.

*UN Resolution 1325: Women at the negotiating table*

Since 2007, Itach-Maaki and 35 other organizations have been working to ensure that UN Resolution 1325 is translated into a state-approved National Action Plan and finally put into practice. The United Nations resolution was passed in 2000 to protect women and promote their participation in negotiations to end violent conflicts. Israel was the first UN member to enact parts of the resolution into national law, including the clause committing to the inclusion of women in public committees and national government teams. Very little has been implemented to date, though. "We are training women from different parts and levels of the population, coming from the entire political spectrum, in order to sensitize them to this resolution as a political instrument and to empower them to participate in the political process," says the 41-year-old women's rights activist Loevy. Her organization includes both Hebrew and Arabic-speaking lawyers who advise low-income women and also fight for gender equality at the political level.

Another organization which invokes UN Resolution 1325 is Women Wage Peace (WWP), which was founded after the Gaza attack in 2014, when many women and mothers with sons in the army were left behind. They do not explicitly formulate a proposed political solution or even sketch what it should look like, but they insist that a solution between Israelis and Palestinians can and must be negotiated and reached. Through its nationwide actions, the grassroots movement grew rapidly. The activists stipulate that all diplomatic options be exhausted before acts of war are waged, demanding a departure from Israel's present almost knee jerk modus operandi. To this end, they have submitted a legislative initiative to the Knesset, so far without success. The women in the movement deliberately take non-partisan stands, intentionally avoiding categorization as left, center, or right, due to which they address citizens of very different political hues. "Being vague is our strength," according to one of their campaigners. But in doing so they alienate many other activists who see a strategic and fundamental need for a clear political stance.

*Gun Free Kitchen Tables!*

Being vague - is not Rela Mazali's thing. As one of Israel's outstanding feminists, she has been committed to social and political justice for decades. Mazali is a co-founder of New Profile, a non-hierarchical feminist movement working for the demilitarization of Israeli society and supporting draft resisters. "Trauma, fear and scare are potent and central ingredients of Israel's militarism,"[[10]](#footnote-10) says the now 71-year-old. "A population that is preoccupied with dangers from outside overlooks the government's acute failures on the inside and is more willing to adapt. Out of fear we continue to feed the military with our children.” One of her three children too did military service many years ago. Mazali recalls that on weekends her son's rifle was in the house. The family suppressed its unpleasant presence and forgot it was there. Society has internalized the military in such a way, she says, that its connection to violence against women remains largely unrecognized.

The seriously uncontrolled proliferation of firearms, whose acquisition is currently being encouraged by increasingly relaxed laws, has acutely increased threats in the domestic environment. Especially during the Corona lockdown, from March to May, the police recorded a 16 percent increase in reported domestic violence - if there is a firearm in the household, the risk of it being used generally increases.[[11]](#footnote-11) In view of such trends, Mazali founded the organization [Gun Free Kitchen Tables](https://gfkt.org/en/) (GFKT) in 2010 to reduce small arms proliferation and tighten gun control. GFKT works in a coalition of 17 organizations under the umbrella of the Haifa-based Isha L'Isha Feminist Center, the oldest feminist grassroots organization in the country, founded in 1983.[[12]](#footnote-12)

On behalf of her organization, Itach-Maaki, a member of the GFKT Coalition, Netta Loevy was involved in a petition to Israel's Supreme Court against reforms in the firearms law. "Hundreds of thousands of Jewish citizens in Israel meet the basic criteria for the possession of firearms because men must undergo comprehensive weapons training in the course of their military service, and this is now enough to qualify them for a gun license," she says. Her fellow campaigner Rela Mazali points out the structural problem: "Firearms are such a routine part of everyday life that most Jewish Israelis perceive them as unproblematic. They are regarded as tools of defense and protection that also grant prestige. From the perspective of anti-militarists, however, they are a murderous threat and the motor of organized crime. When weapons find their way into the private sphere, women face much increased risks - around 20 women are killed by their relatives every year. 

*Neglected and threatened: Palestinian women from Israel*

The greatest risk is "for women belonging to minorities or recently immigrated Jewish groups [...], not because these groups are more violent, but because these women have no access to educational information or to the social services made accessible by such information.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Gun Free Kitchen Tables has estimated that in 2016, there were approximately 270,000 licensed weapons in circulation in Israel, in addition to approximately 400,000 illegal weapons, most of which were owned by Israelis of Palestinian origin.[[14]](#footnote-14) And indeed, statistics show that Palestinian women and Bedouin women from Israel are disproportionately at risk: Between 2014 and 2016, 42 percent of the women murdered belonged to these groups.[[15]](#footnote-15) Many of them were shot. In these communities, which are already subject to discrimination and whose rights were downgraded even further by the anti-Arab National State Law of 2018, the lax gun law is rarely or only loosely enforced.

"What we are talking about here is years of neglect by the state, which promotes conservative-patriarchal and repressive structures among its Palestinian citizens in favor of its own interests," says Meisa Irshaid, legal advisor to GFKT. The activist-lawyer sees no government plan, let alone allocated funds, dedicated to breaking the vicious circle of violence. "If both the murderer and the victim are Palestinians, this is usually not even pursued legally. This is because the state does not consider us equal citizens, even though we make up 20 percent of the population," she reports, "Palestinian citizens of Israel and people from the LGBT community are the groups most severely affected by direct violence and suffer multiple discrimination."

In her neighborhood in Nazareth, 33-year-old Irshaid experiences first-hand the fear that is stirred up and the terror that is spread with small arms. The general public’s powerlessness in the face of an overwhelming problem that the authorities are not concerned about is an almost paralyzing factor. For when women finally decide to file charges against their tormentors, they endanger their lives as supposed traitors - or, like a friend of Irshaid‘s, they receive suggestive offers from the police. This is one of the reasons why the Palestinian community in Israel has little trust in the police, which it perceives as representing Jewish majority or, alternatively, the men. Irshaid stresses how completely the lives of Palestinians from Israel are dominated by the constant threat of weapons. Only state intervention could effectively counteract this. Mistrust and fear lead to the purchase of even more weapons - a danger to the already severely threatened social fabric. "That is why it is important to get the women talking, to break the silence and bring them out of isolation," says Irshaid. 

*An Israeli Spring?*

Samah Salaime is also committed to strengthening Palestinian women from Israel. "It is enough, we must stop this slaughter," she wrote in 2018 in a biting text for the Israeli daily newspaper "Ha'aretz".[[16]](#footnote-16) The blogger and social worker is considered one of Israel's influential feminists. As a descendant of Palestinian refugees, her parents did everything they could to provide her and her three sisters with a good education: "We have lost everything," says Salaime, "but no one can take education away from us." The 45-year-old also passes this on to the younger generation: "We must make society more feminist," she is convinced. The activist has lived for twenty years in Neve Shalom - Wahat al-Salam, a village where Jews and Palestinians live together and work for equality, justice and peace. A mother of three sons, she is responsible for the public relations work of the village's educational system. In 2009 she founded *Na'am - Arab Women in the Center[[17]](#footnote-17)* in the mixed town of Lyd, in order to educate Arabic-speaking women about their rights and to help them protect themselves from violence.

"Over the past ten years, dozens of laws have been passed that are aimed at the exclusion of Arab-Palestinian citizens, culminating in the Nation State Law," the blogger notes. The people who are now demonstrating for change "are admirably spreading a message of hope against the agitation and discrimination in this country. But so far, the demonstrators are predominantly Jewish Israelis, it is a 'Jewish Spring'. We are not yet part of this discourse, which passes by the reality of life of Palestinian Israelis and Palestinians under occupation“.

But there are hopeful first signs: At the beginning of August, over ten thousand Israelis demonstrated in Jerusalem while thousands more demonstrated throughout the country. This time, Arabic-speaking students also took part, side by side with their Jewish fellow students. However, only when there is a dialogue about inclusion and Israeli citizens and residents of all ethnic groups fight equally for change can the Jewish Spring become a spring of all the country's people.

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https://www.blaetter.de/ausgabe/2020/september/feministinnen-fuer-den-frieden-der-kampf-gegen-netanjahu

Translation into English by the author, edited by Rela Mazali

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