

Past Achievements  
and Future Directions of

# Women's and Feminist Organizations in Israel

Overview  
& Executive Summary  
of the Research

## A Participatory Action Research Project

Co- Sponsored by the Dafna Fund  
and the National Council of Jewish Women  
(NCJW)

Nancy Strichman, Ph. D

March 2018



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## PREFACE

**The National Council of Jewish Women, the oldest Jewish women's organization in the United States, was founded in 1893 by Hannah G. Solomon, a visionary leader.** NCJW is a grassroots organization that turns progressive ideals into action with a focus on advancing social and economic justice for women, children and families both in the United States and Israel. Faced with increasing challenges in advancing gender equality in Israel - from the growing power of the rabbinate and its detrimental impact on women's personal status, to the increasing intolerance for women in the public sphere, to the multi-dimensional impact of the constant state of war and insecurity, and to the struggle by the growing number of NGO's working on women's issues to secure adequate funding for sustainability - NCJW decided in early 2016 that it was time to assess the current state of the women's agenda in Israel in order to help chart a future path of strength and sustainability. To this end, NCJW leadership approached the Mazer Family Fund of UJA-Federation of New York for a seed grant to support a research project that would culminate in a one-day symposium bringing together American and Israeli feminist activists. With support from the Mazer Family for this groundbreaking effort, NCJW then turned to the Israel-based Dafna Fund, with its deep knowledge of and commitment to activists in the field, to be its partner in this effort.

**The Dafna Fund, Israel's first and only feminist fund, was established in 2003 by Prof. Dafna Izraeli z"l, a feminist scholar and activist.** The purpose of the Dafna Fund is to promote women as agents of social change and feminist mainstreaming through grant-making, capacity building and convening of feminist thought leaders from all walks of Israeli society. Driven by curiosity and appreciation of the knowledge of wise women in all fields of feminist action, the Dafna Fund was committed to cultivating and supporting evidence-based strategic thinking and action for social transformation. When the board of the Dafna Fund decided to sunset, they knew that they wanted to leave behind a legacy of appreciation for the past achievements of the feminist arena in Israel as well as a bold commitment to charting a future of gender equity and feminist mainstreaming. This exciting and groundbreaking research project came to fruition thanks to a strong partnership between the Dafna Fund and the National Council of Jewish Women represented by Hamutal Gouri, Executive Director of the Dafna Fund, and Dina B. Charnin, Director of Israel Policy and Programs at NCJW who worked tirelessly and with complete devotion to manage both research and symposium projects. Both organizations are so grateful for the partnership and for the opportunity to work closely together and learn so much from one another. It speaks to the importance of North Americans and Israelis working together to advance social change. We are thrilled that the Jewish Women's Funding Network joined us to participate in a week long study tour leading up to the symposium on March 8th, 2018, International Women's day when the research was formally presented.

**We would like to thank Dr. Nancy Strichman** for conducting the research in a spirit of great curiosity and analyzing the findings in such a brilliant and rigorous manner. We thank the research steering committee members Ghada Abu Jaber-Nijem, Maggie Bartura and Prof. Dafna Hacker for their invaluable input and wise guidance. It is our collective hope that the insights and findings presented in this report will help inspire new collaborations, greater focus and increased funding for the entire network of feminist organizations in Israel that are striving each and every day to build a strong civil society with women at its center advancing social change and building a stronger more vibrant democracy.

### **National Council of Jewish Women**

Beatrice Kahn, President

Nancy K. Kaufman, CEO

### **Dafna Fund**

Barbara Dobkin, Chair

Hamutal Gouri, Executive Director

# The story of women's and feminist organizations in Israel

is characterized by great strides, some setbacks, many challenges and marked opportunities for greater impact.

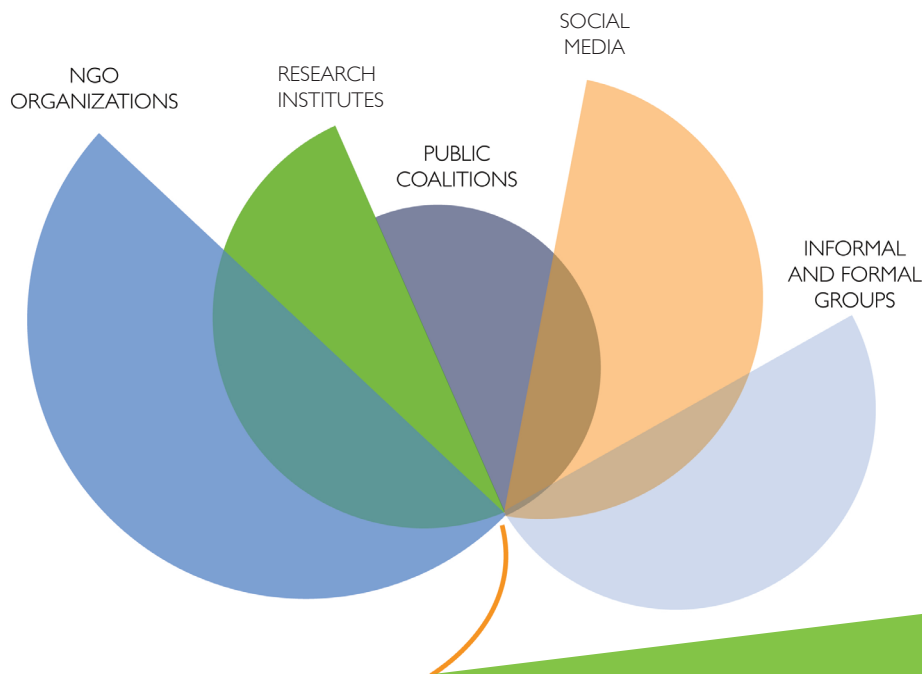
Today, there are more than a hundred organizations active in Israel that are devoted exclusively to advancing women's status or promoting gender equality. These organizations touch on issues as diverse as: economic empowerment, fair and equal political representation, sexual harassment, gender wage gaps, peace efforts, religious freedom, healthy sexuality, preventing gender-based violence and women's expression in the arts and culture.

**Women's and feminist organizations have had notable success over the years** in impacting the public discourse and shaping public policies on topics from domestic violence and political representation to gender sensitive budget analysis and women's economic empowerment.

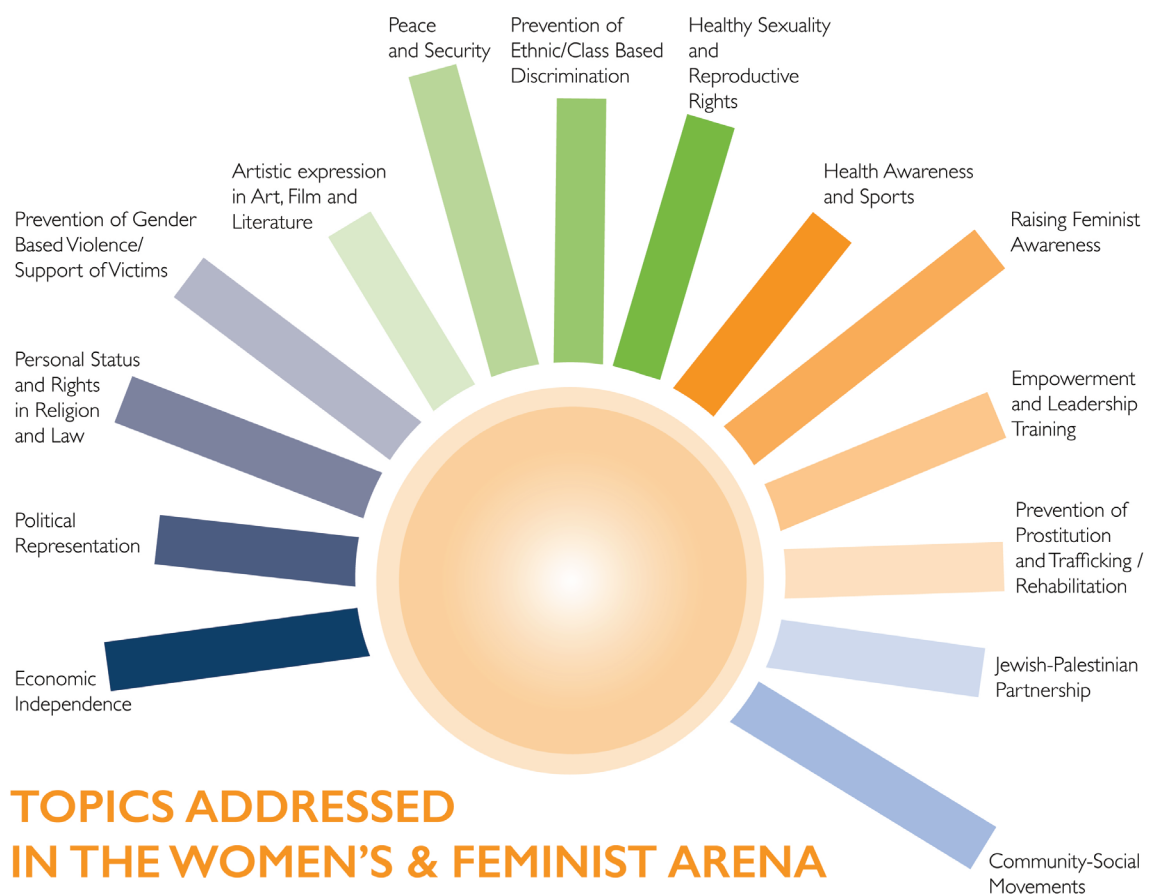
Topics once solely on the feminist agenda have now become mainstreamed and have attracted monetary investments from the public and private philanthropic sectors to improve the lives of women and girls.

Moreover, many broad-based organizations are championing causes such as greater female political leadership and civic engagement.

**New actors are also having a significant impact on the field including:** activists on social media and numerous websites, blogs and mainstream media, activists within the private sector working to advance women's representation in management and professional forums, and civic activists who are leading grassroots initiatives at the community level.



**ACTORS IN THE WOMEN'S  
AND FEMINIST ARENA**

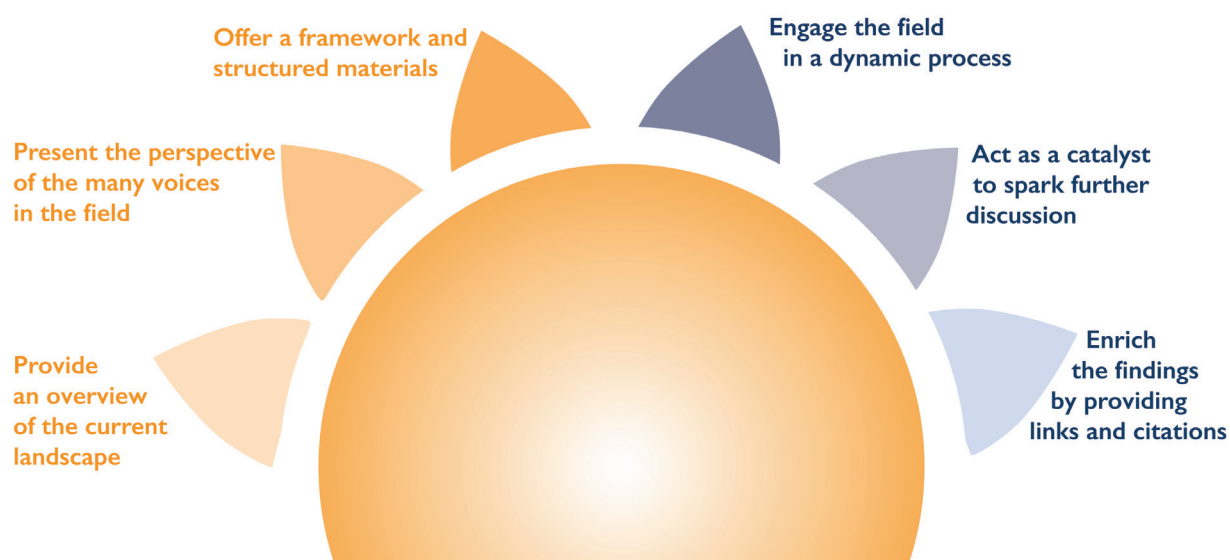


# The Participatory Action Research Project

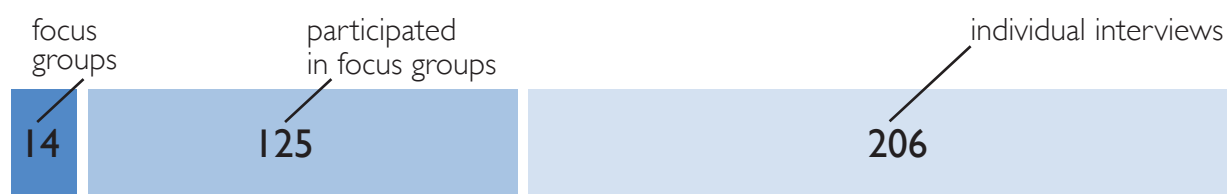
“Past Achievements and Future Directions of Feminist and Women’s Organizations in Israel: A Participatory Action Research Project” is a joint undertaking of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and the Dafna Fund. This project combines both research and action. The research will be used to help leaders, activists, and funders of women’s organizations think strategically and develop a road map for the future advancement of gender equality in Israel.

The research aims to present a snapshot of the agendas, priorities and concerns expressed by the field. It primarily seeks to shed light and build on the vital conversations that are taking place among activists, organizational representatives, funders, journalists, and public officials regarding the current and future efforts in Israel to promote the status of women and advance gender equality.

Throughout the research process, the goal was to act on the principles of participatory action research, a collaborative approach to the research process that emphasizes both participation and action. As such, more than three hundred women were engaged in an ongoing, iterative process which began in January 2017. The process created a depth and breadth of research which is unique, and which may be relevant for other fields in civil society.



## GOALS OF THE RESEARCH AND OF THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS



The final research report identifies achievements and challenges over the past 15 years and poses strategic questions for the future. Key achievements and issues to be considered when framing strategic conversations on the topic of advancing women and girls in Israel include:

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**Strengthening Organizations' Ability to Influence Policymaking:**

Information and knowledge are critical for informed action, for policy and decision makers, funders and the media. There is a need to examine how data collection is being supported as a critical tool for shaping the opinion of policymakers and the public discourse.

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**Building Political Power to Advance Women:**

There is a positive shift in legislation, government allocations and policies benefitting women and girls, in large part thanks to the ongoing advocacy efforts of women's and feminist groups. Yet these gains are very fragile and threatened from a variety of directions. Strategies to galvanize more substantial political power may include increased political engagement and representation for women championing feminist agendas, grassroots engagement and promoting women to key positions in media, civil service and business.

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**Creating Greater Synergy Between Organizational and Independent Activities:**

As the field of activism continues to expand to new actors- online advocates, journalists, as well as informal groups of activists from diverse communities -organizations and activists will benefit from greater synergy and collaboration.

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**Enhancing Diversity While Strengthening Greater Solidarity:**

With so many varied efforts to advance the status of women and girls, it is a significant challenge to take on the goal of building a shared space among so many diverse communities of women.

A) Organizations and activists need to continue creating more diverse and inclusive efforts, while also seeking to create a more unified agenda for advancing women.

B) New thinking and new ways for collaborative efforts are required.

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**Creating Opportunities for Common Ground and Shared Interests:**

A variety of collaborative efforts, from coalitions with broad-based organizations to engagement with male spiritual and political leaders within religious communities, are helping to reframe the discourse to one that perceives the advancement of women and girls as a "community issue" of broader importance.

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**Developing A Broader Base of Support for Women's and Feminist Organizations:**

There is a recognized need by women's and feminist organizations to gain greater visibility, enhance community outreach and create a stronger base for community fundraising.

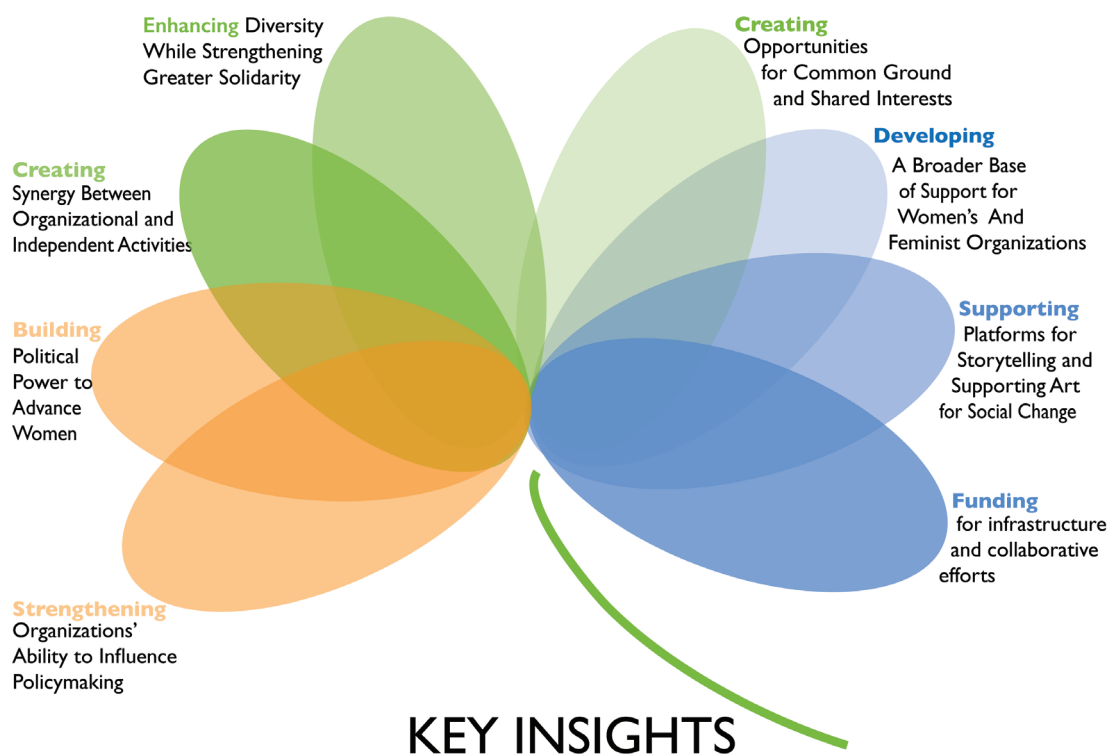
Community development involves the investment of time and resources in outreach, leadership development and engagement.

## Supporting Platforms for Storytelling and Supporting Art for Social Change:

Through a variety of mediums, including social media, film and the arts, women are taking advantage of opportunities to tell their stories and to impact on the public discourse. Both written and visual storytelling are increasingly acknowledged as critical tools for engagement and advocacy.

## Funding for Infrastructure and Collaborative Efforts:

The full report includes messages to funders on how they may best help to enhance the collective impact of efforts to advance women in Israel.



The summary and full report found below detail the achievements of the last 15 years, raise strategic questions, and list specific action steps to be taken in order to spark reflection and initiate new conversations for future directions for women's and feminist organizations in Israel.



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# INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH AND THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

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# For those committed to the advancement of women and gender equality in Israel

there are many complex questions that come to mind when trying to understand the current state of affairs. There has been great progress in the past few decades - increased female political representation, significant advances in women's educational status and employment levels, and growing public awareness of important issues related to advancing the cause of women and girls. Yet, many obstacles remain stubbornly in place. It was in the spirit of sparking greater conversation regarding the current state of women's and feminist organizations in Israel that the Dafna Fund and the National Council of Jewish Women, with the generous support from the Mazer Family Fund of UJA-Federation of New York, commissioned this research.

**The research aims to present a snapshot of the agendas, priorities and concerns expressed by the field.** It primarily seeks to shed light and build on the vital conversations that are taking place among activists, organizational representatives, funders, journalists, and public officials regarding the current and future efforts in Israel promoting the status of women and advancing gender equality. In an effort to provide readers with an opportunity for more in-depth discussion and perspective of the various topics raised in this report, extensive research citations have been highlighted throughout the text. Selected quotes from research participants on the wide variety of topics raised have also been included both in the text of the full report and in the footnotes.

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**More than 300 women were engaged in an ongoing iterative process which began in January 2017.**

**200 women, including activists, nonprofit staff, academics, politicians, funders and journalists were individually interviewed while approximately 125 women participated in 14 focus group sessions.**

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Throughout the research process, the goal was to act on the principles of participatory action research, a collaborative approach to the research process that emphasizes both participation and action. As such, more than three hundred women were engaged in an ongoing iterative process which began in January 2017. Two hundred women, including activists, nonprofit staff, academics, politicians, funders and journalists were individually interviewed while approximately one hundred and twenty-five women participated in fourteen focus group sessions. In an effort to build opportunities for participant engagement, an interim report was circulated in the Fall 2017 to research participants to elicit feedback. As part of this open-ended approach, new focus group topics arose, so that many participants were invited to participate in additional focus groups and/or provide individual feedback on the interim findings of the research.

The nature of this research is primarily to present an overview of the current state of the field and raise strategic questions that are relevant to the work being carried out on behalf of women and girls in Israel. It is hoped that the research process and the subsequent discussions it generates can spark reflection and initiate new conversations on a variety of topics, key to advancing the field further in a constantly changing and challenging landscape.

# OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

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Women's and feminist organizations have had marked success over the years in impacting on the public discourse and shaping public policies on topics ranging from domestic violence and political representation, to gender sensitive budget analysis and economic empowerment of women

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Today in Israel, there are more than a hundred active organizations exclusively devoted to advancing women's status or promoting gender equality. These organizations touch on issues as diverse as economic empowerment, fair and equal political representation, sexual harassment, gender wage gaps, peace efforts, religious freedom, healthy sexuality, preventing gender-based violence and women's expression in the arts and culture. The field has continued to expand over time, adding diversity in terms of both the different identities and agendas of women's organizations.

Despite the challenge of "growing feminism in an unfriendly environment", women's and feminist organizations have had marked success over the years in impacting on the public discourse and shaping public policies on topics ranging from domestic violence and political representation, to gender sensitive budget analysis and economic empowerment of women. Topics once solely on the feminist agenda have now become mainstreamed and have attracted monetary investments from the public and private philanthropic sectors to improve the lives of women and girls. Moreover, many broad-based organizations are championing causes such as greater female political leadership and civic engagement. New actors and new forms of civic action are also having a significant impact on the field - activists on social media, websites, blogs and mainstream media, activists in the private sector working to advance women's representation in management and professional forums, and civil activists who are leading grassroots initiatives at the community level.

Gather the Data  
tools of effective advocacy  
gender analysis of governmental statistics.  
gender analysis  
policy-making expertise  
Keep in mind  
Build Bridges  
Go Political  
Do Your Homework  
Create Shared Spaces  
Strengthen the Core  
Ask Tough Questions  
efforts to advance women  
empowerment  
significant impact

As the field continues to open up to new types of interventions, activism and engagement, the toolkit for advancing women's rights and gender equality has expanded as well. A snapshot of the strategies and activities that characterize the work indicates that there is a diverse and broad range of tactics used, including policy and legal advocacy, provision of direct services, raising public awareness, encouraging activism, community outreach and education, and the nurturing of partnerships and networks.

Yet the volatile social and political context in Israel presents challenges for a unified agenda regarding the advancement of women, as there are many varied experiences for women depending on differences in ethnicity, nationality, economic status, sexual orientation, geographic location and religious affiliation. And indeed, while there is a rich history over the past decade of collaborative efforts and coalitions, without umbrella organizations or other conveners, it is difficult to pinpoint indicators that typically serve as markers of a consolidated movement. Indeed, the question is actually raised whether there is a women's movement per se, or whether it is a mosaic of very diverse efforts that are working in a variety of ways to advance the status of women and gender equality.

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS, SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIC CONCERNS FACING THE FIELD

Key elements that impact the efforts to enhance women's equality and promote gender equality at the state, community, individual and organizational level are explored more in depth in these selected four areas:

1. Government and political representation
2. Public discourse and shift in social norms
3. Advances in women's personal status,
4. Current NGO landscape.

### 1 Government and Political Representation

**Notable Achievements include:**

■ Increased Women's Representation ■ Increased Application of a 'Gender Lens' ■ Government Support for the Traditional Feminist Agenda.

Over the past fifteen years, there has been increasing representation of women in the public and private sector; more legislation for gender equality, and growing female representation in politics. Services that were once seen as strictly on the feminist agenda are now generally



accepted and have been institutionalized around the country. With the growing interest in applying a 'gender lens' to policymaking, government entities are increasingly recognizing the need to gauge the impact of policies on gender equality, collect the relevant data, and develop services that address the unmet needs of women and girls. The accessibility of the global media and the discourse internationally linking women's status and national development is helping to frame policy discussions in Israel. Moreover, with a dramatic increase in the number of women's organizations that are engaged in public advocacy, more NGOs are working in collaborative ways with public authorities to meet informational needs on topics such as the gender gap in income levels between men and women.



### **Significant Challenges Include:**

■ **Lack of Strong Political Will for Advancing Women** ■ **Growing Backlash to Women's Empowerment** ■ **Difficulties in Navigating Public Sector.**

While there has been significant progress in terms of policymaking, use of data and political representation, numerous obstacles remain in place. In the political sphere, it has become very clear, especially in recent years, that greater women's numerical representation alone does not guarantee more attention to the feminist agenda or greater support for legislation in favor of women and girls. While the public sector has taken on the responsibility of supporting programs that were once operated independently by women's organizations, there is concern as to whether these programs will continue to reflect the core principles of women's empowerment, as increased privatization of the public sector brings a great deal of uncertainty and competition. And after many years of efforts to promote civil marriage, enact egalitarian practices such as access to prayer sites, and provide greater protection for women in cases of divorce, there has been little progress in dismantling the prevailing male-dominated structures that allow religious institutions to effectively discriminate against women. Lastly, there is a backlash against the progress of women taking place in an environment suspicious of and even hostile to organizations supporting civil and human rights, with the inevitable risks that are now posed to both individual female activists and women's organizations.



### **Strategic Concerns**

■ **Strengthen Organizations' Influence on Policymaking** ■ **Mobilize the Public for Community Advocacy** ■ **Raise Political Voices.**

Given the recent trends in Israel, it is critically important to consider what kinds of tools and which capacities of women's organizations to support. The professional skills, policymaking expertise and research capacities needed in the field to gather the data for effective advocacy are of utmost importance at this stage, in order to help organizations navigate the challenges of advocacy and partnerships with the government. Likewise, organizations and activists can be bolstered in efforts to better mobilize their base of supporters, volunteers and the wider community, thereby enhancing their role as advocates.



## Questions to Consider on Mobilizing the Public for Community Advocacy:

- What does community-based advocacy look like?
- How can organizations be best equipped to better mobilize their base of volunteer and supporters?
- Which factors need to be in place?
- How can advocacy groups and direct service organizations develop stronger community support to possibly impact on policymaking?
- How is it possible to develop greater political awareness and the link to activism and community advocacy?
- What are the cross-cutting issues that have the greatest potential to mobilize women's organizations and activists from across the political spectrum to create joint mechanisms for advocacy?
- What can be learned from other actors across civil society (i.e., the environmental movement) who have expanded their effort to garner widespread membership and engage in street activism to effect policy change?



## Action Steps...

→ Focus on tools of effective advocacy, including policymaking expertise, research capacities and connection with the field that are of utmost importance at this stage in promoting efforts to advance women. Support efforts to collect compelling data from a variety of sources including the use of hotlines and the gathering of individual stories and tracking of website usage and a gender analysis of governmental statistics.

→ Explore how to strengthen efforts by organizations and activists to push for greater political awareness and action by women of all backgrounds (i.e., community advocacy, grassroots mobilization, fielding more female candidates).

→ Consider ways to get involved as a supporter and/ or volunteer. Explore opportunities to act as a bridge among diverse populations and sectors to create joint mechanisms for advocacy. Examine ways to increase the visibility and outreach of the work to enhance community engagement and broader advocacy efforts.



## Utilizing International Networks to Further Support Local Efforts.

Engagement with international networks over the past decade has helped advance a variety of issues facing women in Israel, from addressing sex trafficking to the emphasis placed on economic empowerment for women. Participation in national and international support networks can foster capacity building on topics such as advocacy and data collection, which are key tools that can be further supported and developed. Yet as women's and feminist organizations take on a very broad range of issues and challenge the status quo, they can be charged with importing ideas that are counter to prevailing local values and open themselves to accusations that they are inviting international criticism that is harmful to the state. As such, while taking advantage of the expanding 'toolkit' of research, ideas and inspiration that is coming from abroad, it is essential

to support efforts that build constructive learning exchanges and dialogue in a way that is culturally sensitive and adaptable to the local context in Israel.



### **Questions to Consider on Strengthening Exchanges and Links with International Networks:**

- How does engagement with international networks and forums enhance the women's agenda in Israel?
- How can opportunities be expanded for greater dialogue and partnership between women's organizations and activists in Israel and other countries? What are the possibilities for joint learning, relationship building, networking, and collaborative efforts?
- How can similar struggles and the shared interests of women from Israel and abroad be included and furthered as part of a learning network? What can be learned from Israel's experience? What models of success for advancing women can be adapted to the Israeli context?
- What can be learned from participation in international networks and learning exchanges (which include activities as diverse as film festivals, professional conferences and site visits) and how can these types of efforts be strengthened?
- How is it possible to cultivate relationship building with networks abroad, including collegial relationships with funders, which spark the development of a shared agenda for greater collective impact and joint action?



### **Action Steps...**

- Assess how to create more learning opportunities and exchanges, as part of a broader effort to nurture a greater sense of mutuality and partnership among women and girls in Israel and in other countries. Support efforts to build on a shared agenda for joint action and consider possibilities for relationship building, networking, and collaborative efforts.
- Join the 'conversation' that has been taking place through venues such as knowledge forums, delegations and film screenings of women's stories.
- Consider the possibilities of further developing sustainable connections and engagement in tandem with philanthropic efforts.

## **2 Public Discourse on Women's Rights**



### **Notable Achievements include:**

#### **■ Change in the Use of Language and Discourse ■ Multiplicity of Outlets for Women's Perspectives and Stories.**

In recent years, there have been dramatic changes in the public discourse on multiple issues of concern to women and girls, along with a growing awareness and exposure to feminist thought. Gender studies programs, many operating for decades, are offered in universities and colleges around the country and have graduated hundreds of activists who are doing a variety of work in the field. The change in the public discourse has reached more traditional communities, and there are previously taboo topics, ranging from issues such as breast cancer to harmful



practices against women, such as polygamy and domestic violence, that are increasingly being addressed and/or challenged in public. The emergence of religious feminism over the past decade has been especially meaningful in Israel, a country where there is no separation of 'church and state'.

The growth of social media and access to the internet has provided a more accessible way for news and commentary from a woman's perspective to be disseminated, sparking social change efforts in Israel as in other parts of the world. With websites that reach many thousands on a daily basis, social activists and journalists can now easily make the claim that they are, as noted by one activist, "raising a generation of feminists" in Israel among diverse communities of women. The growing number of women filmmakers and the greater public exposure to their work is yet another of the many new platforms that has been created by women in the arts to encourage the process of storytelling in all types of formats.



### Significant Challenges

#### **Significant Challenges include:**

■ **Concern regarding the Accessibility of Feminism** ■ **Impact of Rising Religiosity and the Military/Conflict on Public Discourse.**

In spite of the significant progress that has been made, the term 'feminism' is still often negatively perceived by the general community and even by many women. There is also a question of the degree to which many of the past accomplishments of the feminist struggle are acknowledged or simply taken for granted. In general, women's issues are still given a lower priority in the public discourse, while social issues are generally considered secondary to security concerns. Indeed, the state of constant conflict and a divisive political landscape is a reality that especially marginalizes women's voices. Moreover, the rising nationalism and religious fundamentalism that is increasingly part of the political atmosphere is further preventing the inclusion of women's voices in the public debate.



### Strategic Concerns

#### **Strategic Concerns**

■ **Cultivating Opportunities for Strengthening the Work of Newly Emerging Actors** ■ **Synthesizing Different Kinds of Activism.**

As the field of activism continues expanding to new actors - online advocates, journalists, as well as informal groups of activists from diverse communities, it is important to consider how to create better synergy among the various types of efforts to advance women and girls. The upshot is that it is critical, especially with the broad outreach of social media and the internet, to effectively engage and support all manner of activism, to develop a more symbiotic relationship between grassroots and online activists and established nonprofits. Recent examples of community-wide initiatives that successfully break down the official categories of activism should be further explored.





## Questions to Consider

### Questions to Consider on Synthesizing Different Forms of Activism:

- How is it possible to nurture a more synergetic relationship between grassroots and online activists and organizational representatives? What are the opportunities for greater cooperation among established nonprofits, emerging initiatives, and alternative, more spontaneous efforts of activism?
- How can more fruitful dialogue and conversation between the different kinds of activism be encouraged?
- What mechanisms are available to fund and support more sustained activism, both on and offline, for those activists who would prefer not to become more 'institutionalized' in their activities?

How can informal and formal meeting venues and networking opportunities be created and sustained to enhance the overall impact of the work?



## Action Steps...

### Action Steps...

- Take on the goal of building a shared space on a variety of platforms.
- Consider how organizational representatives and grassroots and online activists are able to create relationships to enhance the overall impact of the work.
- Reflect on a variety of opportunities for supporting coordinated efforts and ways to support innovative and diverse forms of activism from different sectors.



## Strategic Concerns

### ■ Creating Opportunities for Common Ground, Shared Interests, and Greater Solidarity.

As the field of advancing women and girls continues to expand, new opportunities for developing creative partnerships are presenting themselves. A variety of collaborative efforts, from coalitions with broad-based organizations to engagement with male spiritual and political leaders within religious communities, are helping to reframe the discourse to one that perceives the advancement of women and girls as a "community issue" of broader importance. Cooperative efforts continue to be developed as well among women from diverse communities. One of the challenges is to consider what steps should be taken to encourage collaborations on topics of shared interest, carefully considering who the potential new allies in the field are, both in terms of varied populations and different sectors of society (i.e., academia, governmental sector and private sector).



## Questions to Consider

### Questions to Consider in Identifying Shared Interests:

- What are the levers to support greater collaboration among diverse groups of women?
- What are the shared issues today in public discourse that can serve to unite women?
- How can greater solidarity be encouraged around issues that have the potential to galvanize the public?
- What can be learned from organizations, in fields as diverse as peace efforts to women's health, that have built strong partnerships with diverse communities of women and operate in geographically dispersed areas?



## Action Steps...

- How is it possible to identify shared strategies among allies supporting women's issues to impact on the public discourse and affect change? What is the role of broad-based organizations, religious institutions, community leaders and others that support the efforts to advance women?

- Who might be new allies to work on particular issues and how can cooperative efforts be more productively framed?

### Action Steps...

- Keep exploring the potential for greater cooperation on issues between women of diverse backgrounds as well as between women and men. Support efforts to reach greater solidarity on specific topics as a critical way to amplify the overall voice of women.

- Consider your strategic approach to the work (i.e., how to reach your target population and who that is) your effort in building long-term partnerships. Explore issues such as the language(s) used in the workplace and in outreach efforts, the diversity of your staff and board, and the role models in your organization.

- Take the opportunity to share your platform with women from various backgrounds and communities to build connections. Keep in mind the importance of collecting a mosaic of perspectives, and the use of stories to illustrate complexities and share multiple narratives.

## 3 Advances in Women's Personal Status

### Notable Achievements include:

#### ■ Increasing Educational and Employment Opportunities Across Sectors of Society for Women.

While there is a wide range of factors that account for the lifestyle and status of women, attention is being paid specifically to the advances in education and economic empowerment- two of the top items on the agenda of the government and NGOs. And indeed, from micro-enterprises to fair trade initiatives, there have been innovative and diverse efforts over the past years to promote women's economic independence. In conjunction with these types of endeavors, there are also many formal and informal networks of support that have been spearheaded by women in various professional settings in an effort to cultivate friendlier work environments, opportunities for learning, career advancement, and communities of support. Lastly, the goal of enhancing educational and employment opportunities for women, especially within the Palestinian and ultra-Orthodox community, has garnered support from both the public and philanthropic sectors in recent years.

### Significant Challenges include:

#### ■ Persistence of Traditional Gender Roles and Patriarchal Structures, in the face of Growing Religious Fundamentalism.

There is progress, yet the question remains as to the extent to which efforts to increase the income of women have also been accompanied by other supportive structures and shifts in cultural attitudes. While it is relatively easy to provide job seminars, offer loans and give skills trainings, it is much more difficult to address the broader structural barriers and social obstacles that continue to impede progress.



## Notable Achievements



## Significant Challenges

And in the midst of significant advancements in so many fields, there is still a question as to the degree to which many basic assumptions about women and their gender roles have evolved over time.

Workplace cultures across a wide spectrum of professions present barriers to women when it comes to their advancement or equal pay, and surprisingly high numbers of sexual harassment scandals still plague large institutions in the public and private sectors. The persistence of harmful social norms continues, with alarming statistics of incidents of domestic violence and even murder. Lastly, not only has the overlap between religion and state remained firmly intact, but there are numerous signs that the growing influence of extremist religious views has only served to discriminate against women even more.



### **Strategic Concerns**

#### **■ Considering the Role of: ■ Women's Organizations ■ Broad-Based Organizations.**

With investments from the public and private sectors in areas such as employment and economic independence for women, strategies such as employment training and micro credit financing are being employed not only by women's organizations, but also by more broad-based organizations and government. In advancing the cause of women and girls, it is important to reflect on which issues are drawing the greatest support, what are the most effective ways to address these issues, and how can the capacities of individuals and organizations be strengthened. At the same time, intractable problems and complex policy-making processes require the continued support of a cadre of strong, flagship women's organizations to promote a women's agenda over time with a particular focus on achieving full equality. However, as efforts to improve the lives of women continue to advance and the field remains open to new players including more broad-based organizations, women's and/or feminist organizations will have to continue to redefine their distinguishing, unique value.



### **Questions to Consider on the Role of Women's Organizations:**

- What is the current state of dialogue and cooperation taking place between broad-based organizations and women's organizations?
- What are the advantages of collaborative efforts? Should such exchange be better nurtured and supported?
- What are possible steps to ensure that broad-based organizations that are involving themselves with women's issues are fully prepared and committed to promoting gender equality?
- What conversations are taking place to consider which topics could be mainstreamed' (i.e., political training programs) and which should be targeted only for women or girls (i.e., recovery from sexual abuse)?

### **Action Steps...**

- Encourage strategic conversations on how women's organizations and feminist activists should continue to support gender mainstreaming, build the women's agenda, while also sustaining their own unique added value.
- Explore ways to create opportunities for further exchange and dialogue between women's organizations and broad-based organizations



that hold shared agendas. Support collaborative efforts that build on the unique strengths and contributions of diverse players in the field to further greater impact.



### ■ Working to Address Structural Changes ■ Incorporate Systematic Approaches.

Over the past decade, more attention has been paid to the acknowledged limitations of women's empowerment strategies and the importance of recognizing broader structural barriers and social obstacles.

For example, specifically with regard to economic independence, the question remains as to the extent to which the efforts to increase the income of women has also been accompanied by a shift in cultural attitudes, available job opportunities and/or supportive structures such as child care and transportation. All types of empowerment programs, according to research participants, have continued to evolve so that they now seek to address not only empowerment at the individual level, but at the collective level as well. It is the translation of individual empowerment to collective empowerment that remains a core principle, and it is worthwhile to assess educational and/or employment programs with this consideration in mind.



### Questions to Consider on Ensuring a More Systematic Approach:

- How is the term 'empowerment' defined in the creation of programs seeking to enhance the educational and employment opportunities of women and girls?
- To what degree do these programs incorporate an approach that looks both at individual achievement and broader social issues?
- How are structural barriers and/or cultural norms that often serve as major obstacles to full equality being addressed in the program content?
- Are programs focusing on individual achievement also considering opportunities to equip women activists with the tools needed to advance their status and better conditions both within and without their own communities?
- How does work at the individual level translate into enabling women to become agents of change and community leaders educating others?



### Action Steps...

- Conceptualize women's empowerment in terms of its economic, socio-cultural, familial/ interpersonal, legal, political and psychological factors, and how each of these factors influences the household, the community and beyond. (See Appendix 2 for a conceptual overview of women's empowerment, Malhotra et al., 2002).
- Examine how programs are targeting their strategies and creating interventions with these broader considerations in mind.

## 4 Landscape of NGO work



### **Notable Achievements Include:**

■ **An Increase in the Number and Diversity of Organizations** ■ **Outreach to Targeted Populations** ■ **Services Provided** ■ **Opportunities for Collaboration.**

A broad range of women's groups have been established in the past decade or so, from small grassroots initiatives to larger, institutionalized organizations to address the needs and interests of women from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, including newly arrived immigrants and refugees.

The very existence of many of these organizations is considered an achievement and a step toward greater progress in improving the lives of women all over Israel. The diversity in the agendas of these organizations continues to expand, and the strategies employed by organizations and activists continue to develop in new, innovative directions. Moreover, there are many opportunities for women to engage in activism that are rooted in their own feminist principles and that tackle more general societal concerns. Indeed, it is possible to locate feminist work in all types of NGOs and public initiatives.



### **Significant Challenges Include:**

■ **Lack of Visibility of the Work** ■ **Problematic Funding Landscape** ■ **Difficulty in Integrating Diverse and Marginalized Voices.**

While there is a vibrant field of women's organizations and feminist activism, many organizations involved with women's issues are not necessarily well known by the general public. And while there has been significant progress over the years toward greater inclusion, the challenge of integrating diverse voices into the mainstream agenda of women's organizations remains unresolved.

Questions have also been raised about the ability of established organizations to mobilize large numbers of activists and supporters in order to effect large-scale community change. Moreover, the expansion and diffusion in the number of initiatives dealing with women's issues has led to a sharp increase in competition for funding at the same time that the amount of funds available in Israel and from overseas has diminished. As a result, the field has been left with few natural conveners, and there is a widespread concern regarding the lack of solidarity or "sense of sisterhood" on a variety of issues, a situation which many feel misses an opportunity to greatly amplify the voices of women.



### **Strategic Concerns**

**Reflecting on:** ■ **Funding Mechanisms** ■ **Relationships** ■ **Philanthropic Requirements.**

Over the years, critics of ngo-ization claim that it has led to a weakening of social movements. Moreover, well-intentioned philanthropic practices in various fields of civil society have been seriously challenged over whether they have inadvertently diminished the ability of established organizations to mobilize large numbers of volunteers and activists in order to effect widespread change. In light of this, it is worth examining

how current funding policies advance or perhaps might even inhibit the capacity of community leaders to gather and mobilize supporters. In addition, it is important to consider how the emphasis on project-based methodology affects leaders' ability to create flexible strategic plans that can respond to volatile situations in Israel. Foundations today, should explore how to balance their own strategic needs with the needs of the field so that their grantees have some latitude to act proactively and with flexibility in the dynamic work of social change.



### **Questions to Consider on Philanthropic Practices:**

- What is the best way to support organizational efforts that are aimed at creating broad, systematic change? How can the work of organizations and activists be enhanced?
- How do the current reporting mechanisms help or hinder the ability of an organization to be strategic and responsive to current concerns, especially in such a volatile environment?
- How do the current reporting structures inform decision making processes both for funders and for organizations/activists?
- How are funders nurturing long-term relationships with organizations to support both infrastructure needs and provide strategic flexibility? What does it mean to create partnerships in philanthropy?
- How do funders' emphasis on innovation impact work in the field?
- How can systematic change be supported over time, and what are realistic expectations regarding such change in the short term?



### **Action Steps...**

- Ensure that funders consider their broader role in supporting the overall field of advancing women and long-term systematic change, and not limit their support to specific projects or topics that are currently trending.
- Review current reporting mechanisms in terms of how they advance the work of organizations and activists, inform decision making processes and present learning opportunities for both funders and organizations.



### **■ Strengthening Efforts to Diversify Resources ■ Enhance Community-based Fundraising.**

Over the past decade, a paradigm-shift in community-based fundraising and income generating activities has taken place, and women's organizations are gradually recognizing the need to diversify their funding sources and tap other means of financial support.

Organizations are employing different strategies to develop additional sources of income, garner greater philanthropic support locally and more broadly engage with the community. Many of these efforts reinforce another important goal of organizations which is to extend their outreach, effectively engage with their local communities and build long-term support. While volunteer engagement has always been a priority for many of these organizations, more and more nonprofits in this field are creating a base for community fundraising (i.e., membership drives, local fundraising events, online campaigns, active board members).

Activities that provide opportunities for meaningful community engagement, including platforms for exchange and storytelling, should be nurtured and further developed.



### **Questions to Consider on Diversification of Resources and Community Outreach:**

- How can organizations gain greater visibility and broaden their community outreach?
- What are the possibilities for expanding local, volunteer engagement to create a stronger base for community fundraising (i.e., membership drives, fundraising events, online campaigns, active board members)?
- What types of resource-sharing models, shared media campaigns and coalition building efforts by NGOs can be replicated?
- What cooperative approaches to marketing items for sale and joint grant applications can be utilized?
- Are there other ways to diversify resources and forge new partnerships with other sectors (i.e., public, private)?
- How is it possible to expand the opportunities for shared platforms to promote story-telling and artistic expression?




### **Action Steps...**

- Build on innovative efforts to create resource-sharing models, shared media campaigns and coalition building to enhance the overall impact of the work.
- Explore efforts to diversify resources and create partnerships with other sectors (i.e., public, private).
- Consider how to support the efforts to gain greater visibility, broaden community outreach and expand volunteer engagement to create a stronger base for community fundraising. Expand opportunities for shared platforms to promote story-telling and artistic expression.

## **Conclusion:**

As indicated above, and throughout the full report below, the collaborative approach to the research sought to emphasize both participation and action at every stage of the process. It is hoped that concerns and action steps summarized above and highlighted in the full report can help to spark reflection and initiate new conversations on a variety of topics that are essential to achieving greater collective impact in the future.





The research report  
identifies achievements  
and challenges  
over the past 15 years,  
as well as posing  
strategic questions  
for the future.

## A Participatory Action Research Project

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