Chapter 9
Avoiding Conscription in Israel:
Were Women Pawns in the Political Game?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter tackles Zionism as a modern manifestation of nationalism that included religion as an essential component of national identity. Positing from a feminist perspective that national identity is synonymous with masculinity, the author searches for the women’s place in the Zionist movement, particularly through the prism of military service. The Israeli army had a major role in the creation of a Zionist national ethos, and the concept of a people’s army, where women should be equal participants shaped the country as the only western democracy that conscripted women. With the establishment of the state, conscription to the IDF was made mandatory for both men and women. However, women’s conscription met bitter opposition from religious Orthodox circles. This chapter analyzes how orthodox women were political pawns in the hands of religious leaders. The author claims that they were robbed of their right to choose military service and as such to be an equal part of Israel’s diverse society.
INTRODUCTION

In May 1948 the State of Israel was established as a Jewish democratic state and the IDF as one of Israel’s structures was formed. The call to conscript both men and women into the military to defend the new State from invasion by neighboring countries was unique to Israel. No other country around the world conscripted women. David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, thought that women should participate in defending their settlements but not engage in combat. A woman’s first obligation, in his eyes, was to be a wife and mother, which was *the* most common approach to the role of women. The idea of women participating in the defense of Israel was, in a way, unique. The *Chalutzim* (pioneers) were the majority of those new immigrants who came to Palestine at the beginning of the 20th century. They were mainly secular Jews with a socialist orientation, who wanted to build a home for the Jewish people, a home meaning a nation.

There are many definitions of nationalism. One definition that might explain the nationalism of the early settlers in Palestine is that theirs was a cultural form of nationalism. European nationalism influenced the Zionist movement The Zionist movement being a nationalist movement, which was an ethnic-cultural movement and “the new Jew is an expression of the radical revolution that Zionism aspired to create in the life of the Jewish people” (Conforti, 2011: 99). In this school of thought the male body was a significant symbol, a return to nature and to the body – the male body. The link between nation and gender was actually manifested in the ideal of the male body, and the New Jew as a national sign (Kimmerling, 1993). The male body became the Zionist ethos of physical force and strength, portraying the “mythological Sabra (Prickly Pear), the prototype of the Israel-born new Jew”, as a person who is thorny outside and soft inside” (Klein, 2002).

An interesting phenomenon, on the other hand, that many feminist scholars emphasized is that many leaders, politicians and ideologists depict a nation as a woman to be protected by brave male citizen warriors, which is a common nationalist metaphor. Consequently, an analysis of the social construction of gender and how it expresses itself in Nationalism is the relationship between “woman as signifier of the nation and the warriors trained to defend the homeland”. The manner in which the image of the warrior is depicted in nationalist narratives, as well as the notion that women embody national honor, influences to a certain extent how women will participate in nationalist politics (Banerjee, 2003). There is an inherent paradox in the ways theories of nationalism have treated gender relations in general and women in particular says Yuval Davis (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In nationalist rhetoric the homeland is constructed as a woman/mother; wars are fought to defend the women and children. On the other hand, most theories of nations and nationalisms
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