CAPITALIZING ON WOMEN'S TRADITIONAL ROLES IN ISRAELI PEACE ACTIVISM

A COMPARISON BETWEEN WOMEN IN BLACK AND CHECKPOINT WATCH

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis

Submitted by Sharon Deutsch-Nadir

April 2005

THE FLETCHER SCHOOL

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has".

Margaret Mead

"Be the change you wish to see in the world"

Mahatma Gandhi

For Gal, Shirley and my parents who trained me well in (domestic) conflict resolution

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Women's peace activism in conflict areas lies at the intersection of traditional and non-traditional. On the one hand, a growing body of literature and research refers to women, when compared to men, as more peace loving. They are more likely to support a peaceful solution rather than a violent one, and adopt a collaborative rather than an adversarial approach. That, some may argue, goes back to women's traditional role of life-giving rather than life-taking. On the other hand, peace activism, or any kind of activism for that matter, is practiced in the public sphere. It challenges societal and political norms, it encourages women to go outside the traditional and private spaces they usually occupy and it empowers them to speak out.

As women in the 21st century, following feminist activism, are continuously encouraged, to go outside the home and against their traditional social place, express their opinions and fight widespread inequality, the question remains: What if women's unique skills <u>are</u> the significant asset they offer to conflict management and conflict resolution? What if the nurturing role of the life-giver holds within it the unique power and perspective for the world of international conflict, where the male dominant perspective leads to bloodshed and fear? Does capitalizing on women's unique skills as peace activists creates the necessary "culture of peace" on the way to the resolution of the conflict?

In this paper I have chosen to examine these questions through the work of women peace activists in Israel. As an Israeli, I have been living and studying the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and have been exposed, although not by personal experience, to the work women

peace activists have been engaged in, particularly during the years of the *Intifadas*. This research is divided into four main parts. The first section will provide the theoretical framework for women's peace activism in conflict areas, touching upon the psychological aspects, the promotion of alternative dispute resolution in international relations and some of the success of women around the world as peace-builders at the grass-roots level. The second part will focus on women's peace activism in Israel, elaborating on the social context of women's activism in Israel, a country in a constant state of war since its establishment, and therefore a very militaristic political structure. The third part covers the case studies I have chosen to compare – *Women in Black* (in Hebrew "Nashim beshachor") and *Machsom Watch* (in English: "Checkpoint Watch"). The two women-only organizations, present two different strategies for their involvement in peace activism – the first, *Women in Black*, is using silent vigils at major intersections, attempting to raise awareness for their call to "end the occupation"; the other, *Machsom Watch*, a human rights monitoring group, capitalizing on women's particular skills and traditional roles as mediators, life-givers (as opposed to life-takers) and problem-solvers, to ease the plight of Palestinian at checkpoints. Finally the conclusions section will refer to the initial question of this work, particularly regarding the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Two major assumptions must be addressed at the outset – First, my attempt to address the questions regarding women's unique skills as peace promoters, indeed assumes that these skills do exist and that women do bring "something different" to the table. This assumption is addressed in the body of this paper, albeit it does not represent the core question. Second, in this work I concentrate on the activities of women as change agents

in conflict areas, and in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is not my intention to undermine the activities of the mixed gendered peace groups in Israel and their contribution to the change in mindset of the Israeli public. Finally, it is not my objective to discuss the contribution of women's peace activism to the status of women in the societies they work within, or specifically in Israel. The link between feminism and peace activism will be discussed, yet only as part of the theoretical framework, rather than the actual comparison between *Women in Black* and *Machsom Watch*. I have chosen this approach for two reasons: (1) in order to focus on women's roles as peace activists, although it may be argued that peace activism and feminism are impossible to separate, and one necessarily impacts the other (2) a recurring theme among activists of both organizations is different levels of comfort with feminism as an ideology, with some women defining themselves as feminists and other resenting the term.

It is my intention, however, to highlight the strength, cooperation and legitimacy emanating from women's peace work in Israel when non-traditional activism is complemented by women's perceived traditional roles in the Israeli social narrative.

I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:WOMEN'S STRENGTHS AT THE CORE

1.1 Why Women?

It is in women's best interests to avoid conflicts: they constitute the majority of refugees

and are exposed to sexual abuse; they are often responsible for maintaining the daily

routine at home in times of peace, and expected to continue in that capacity under the

extraordinary circumstances of war as well. All four Geneva Conventions, the leading

humanitarian legal tools protecting civilians in conflict areas, acknowledge women (as

well as children and the elderly) as populations at risk, who are in need of protection

from violence caused by war and conflict. Even in the post conflict phase, when women's

risk of violence has been reduced and societies are being rebuilt, the attention to women's

activity is usually limited to increasing women's numbers at decision-making bodies, or

creating a gender-aware sustainable development agenda[1]. This reflects an outlook

through an organizational lens within the traditional structures of the state, or as an

official agenda put in place to protect women as an economically weaker part of society.

Yet in this discussion we move beyond women's role as victims of conflicts or the

weaker social group, and into their role as peace activists, outside the political

mainstream of patriarchal societies. With a growing body of research regarding the

different approach of women's activism in conflict areas, there are those arguing against

exercising the typical role women would traditionally play within the private sphere. The

rationale behind it is focusing on the relative gains women have attained over years of

feminist struggle. The purposed notion in this research is to balance women's peace

activism - clearly a challenge to their perceived social role, with the strengths and

---

[1] Dyan E. Mazurana and Susan R. McKay, *Essays on Human Rights and Democratic Development.*
(Montreal: International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 1999),1.

expertise they bring as mediators, bridge-builders and problem-solvers to the area of conflict resolution and peace activism. It is a combination that empowers women rather than intensifies a traditional division between women and men, and one which supports and promotes a culture of peace for communities and peoples at war.

1.2 Historical Perspective: Are Women Peace-full?

The traditional division between the public sphere belonging to the man and the private sphere left for the woman, has been sustained within the discourse of war and peace as well. Throughout history, men were the subjects of admiration for courageous battlefield performance, for heroic actions against the enemy or, sometimes, the center of devastating stories of defeat and humiliation. Peace was negotiated, at the end of the fighting, by those same men who started it all. Women were always there, yet their role not considered central. More often than not, they were the mothers left behind making their children's lives as normal as possible; the ones who moved the economy forward as the men were fighting far from home; even the ones who the soldiers would romanticize about, knowing they are fighting to protect their women and children.

The period of 1970-1985 created the initial opportunity to address women's roles in the public sphere within the conflict resolution field, as feminist research and social movement theory and practice developed[2]. Feminist theory and research provided an alternative approach to traditional conflict resolution thought, as it critiqued the prevailing emphasis on hierarchy and coercive power that reflected a traditional world order dominated by men's experiences. The alternative suggested was approaching the resolution of a conflict with a non-hierarchical, relations-based approach to reach

---

[2] Louis Kriesberg, "The growth of the Conflict resolution Field," in *Turbulent Peace –The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Olser Hampson and Pamela Aall (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001), 412-413.

agreement through a "relatively consensual decision-making process"[3]. The developments in social movements' theory stressed not only the importance of grievances as a source of social movement activity, but the belief that such grievances can be redressed though social activism. Peace movements during that period evolved into using both the traditional forms of public demonstrations, but at the same time turned to innovative kinds of civil disobedience, within the framework of political mobilization campaigns and people-to-people programs[4].

The shift in the typology of conflict since the late 1980's – from inter-state to intra-state, the direct targeting of civilians, and the cruelty and suffering that were delivered worldwide through sophisticated means of media and technology[5] – have led to a shift in the traditional roles of women as well, and have forced them to take a stand and let their voices be heard in the public sphere. In Sri-Lanka, India-Pakistan, the Philippines, Argentina and Sudan – in many more places women made the impossible possible, by actively bridging over ethnic, religious, political and social gaps, showing their disagreement with war and support for peace. As Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, remarked in October 2000 to the Security Council:

> *" ...women, who know the price of conflict so well, are also often better equipped than men to prevent or resolve it. For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls"[6].*

---

[3] Ibid., 412
[4] Ibid., 413
[5] Ibid., 413-414
[6] UN Press Release SG/SM/7598, "Secretary General Calls for Council Action to Ensure Women are Involved in Peace and Security Decisions", October 24, 2000; available from http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/20001024.sgsm7598.doc.html

1.3 The Psychological Research: Are Women Peace-full?

Psychological research has established some level of validation for women's relationship based approach to resolving conflicts. Carol Gilligan's research[7] with children, college students and adults, identified the different "voice"[8] that women have, that leads them to react differently when faced with conflict:

> *"Reframing these questions to make these relational realities explicit – how*
>
> *to live in relationship with others, what to do in the face of conflict – I found*
>
> *that I heard women's and men's voices differently. Women's voices*
>
> *suddenly made new sense and women's approaches to conflict were often*
>
> *deeply instructive because of the constant eye to maintaining relational*
>
> *order and connection. It was concern about relationship that made women's*
>
> *voices sound "different" within a world that was preoccupied with*
>
> *separation and obsessed with creating and maintaining boundaries between*
>
> *people – like the New Englanders in Robert Frost's poem who say that*
>
> *"good fences make good neighbors"[9]*

Gilligan identified in her research the relational sub-context characterizing women's experiences, and expressed through an "ethic of care" as opposed to men who carry a morals-based sub-context to their experiences, expressed through an "ethic of justice":

---

[7] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1993), xvi.
[8] According to Gilligan, the meaning of voice is the core of the self, which both natural and cultural, used as a channel to connect the outer and inner worlds. Ibid., xvi.
[9] Ibid., xiv.

"While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality – that

everyone should be treated the same – an ethic of care rests on the

premise of nonviolence – that no one should be hur"t[10]

In her book, Gilligan highlights the fact that psychological research has traditionally

assumed a single mode of social experience - that of the man's - thus contributing to

identifying women's social experience as the deviant, the less than normal. Applying

Gilligan's conclusion about women's different voice within the field of international

conflict resolution, allows for a solid foundation for women to exercise their different

approach as alternative for the traditional "masculine voice".

1.4 Women in International Relations: A Feminist Approach

Similar to Gilligan's research findings about modern psychology feeding off of the

masculine experience, thus making the feminine experience one that is not up to

standards, Ann Tickner identifies that the same "truth" has been applied within the realm

of international politics:

"Since foreign and military policy-making has been largely conducted by

men, the discipline that analyzes these activities is bound to be primarily

about men and masculinity. We seldom realize we think in these terms,

however; in most fields of knowledge we have become accustomed to

equating what is human with what is masculine. Nowhere is this more true

than in international relations, a discipline that, while it has for the most

part resisted the introduction of gender into its discourse, bases its

---

[10] Ibid., 174

assumptions and explanations almost entirely on the activities and

experiences of men"[11]

In her attempt to bring a gendered analysis to the realm of international relations,

Tickener draws upon a multitude of feminist theories emanating from different traditions

and paradigms, with the common thread of expressing the mostly invisible women's

experiences shared by all:

> *"While it is obvious that not all women are feminists, feminist theories are*
>
> *constructed out of the experiences of women in their many and varied*
>
> *circumstances, experience which have generally been rendered invisible*
>
> *by most intellectual disciplines"[12]*

Applying a feminist approach to international relations analysis, will not only expose

women's experiences as players within the international system, but will also allow for a

different kind of analysis that will support the efforts of solving current world

insecurities[13].

One approach linking femininity and international politics argues that women are more

likely to choose the path of compromise to resolve international disputes, and less likely,

when compared to men, to believe that a war is a necessary means to solve a conflict[14].

The premise for such an argument is reflected in characteristics of international relations

where courage, independence and toughness are identified as masculine traits, whereas

compromise, pacifism and relationship are associated with women[15].

---

[11] J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992), 5-6
[12] Ibid., 14; for further elaboration on the different contemporary feminist theories, see 14-17.
[13] Ibid., 18.
[14] Mark Tessler and Ina Warriner, "Gender, Feminism, and Attitudes Toward International Conflict: Exploring Relationships with Survey Data From the Middle East," *World Politics*, no. 49, vol. 2 (1997): 251.
[15] Tickner, 6.

Emphasizing the pacifism of women as opposed to men, is often linked to the experience of motherhood, which by now may be perceived as a social construct associated with caring practices for others rather than the actual bearing of children[16], and therefore more broadly applicable. Nonetheless, the motherhood experience is itself representative of two overlapping approaches to defining the link between gender and international relations:

> *"Two overlapping visions of the motherhood experience and its salience*
> *are found in those feminist and other discourses that seek to establish a*
> *link between gender and international affairs. The first celebrates a*
> *cultural feminism, a feminism of identity, in which the "female" values of*
> *caring and nurturance are given prominence. The second introduces the*
> *concept of "moral motherhood", which is said to incline women toward*
> *"preservative love" and the elimination of violence in human relations"[17].*

The critique on the cultural approach to feminism addresses both its empirical as well as its philosophical and political assumptions –

> *"..critics charge that attributions of empathy, nurturance and caring*
> *reinforce traditional stereotypes about women and retard the feminist goal*
> *of emancipation. On the one hand, some postmodern feminist theorists*
> *insist that there are no "essential components" that characterize all*
> *women. On the other hand, some assert that the emphasis on caring is*

---

[16] Sara Ruddick, "Maternal thinking," *Feminist Studies* .6, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 346
[17] Tessler and Warriner, 253

itself misplaced, either seeing this as a patronizing or disputing the

hypothesized link to public and international affairs"[18]

The second closely connected feminist discourse emphasizes the concept of "moral motherhood", which refers to women's moral responsibility as mothers to avoid and eliminate any form of violence in the world. This approach is almost by definition a pacifist one, as "maternal motherhood" does not distinct between individual and collective forms of violence finding them both abhorrent and necessarily avoidable[19]. The relevant critique regarding the significance of the "moral motherhood' approach is twofold: (1) both men and women, are capable of maternal thinking in its moral sense, and therefore this cannot be considered a uniquely feminine discourse (2) the emphasis of "maternal thinking" on motherhood reduces women to "uni-dimensional actors and obscures the diversity of the factors that influence their attitudes and behaviors"[20].

The opposing notion to the direct link between women and pacifism is one that addresses women's roles as active citizens, bringing about change within conflicting communities in order to achieve a multidimensional type of security addressing not only the lack of war, but an emphasis on a strong linkage between peace, development and disarmament[21].

The notion is therefore, capitalizing on women's different roles – as mothers, as war victims, as preservers of their communities – in order to achieve a change on the ground. Women's experience in that respect has been that of empowerment:

---

[18] Ibid., 253

[19] Ibid., 254

[20] Ibid., 254

[21] Betty A Reardon, *Women and Peace: Feminist Visions of Global Security* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 146

"Women at Greenham Common demonstrating against the installation of
cruise missiles in Britain in 1981 came to see themselves as strong, brave,
and creative – experiences frequently confined to men[22]. The Madres de la
Plaza de Mayo, demonstrating during the 1980's in support of those who
had disappeared in Argentina during the military dictatorship,
experienced similar empowerment"[23]

It is this approach that holds within it the potential for both peace and social mobilization by and for women in conflict areas.

1.5 About Women's Particular Skills in the Realm of Peace and Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution scholars, such as Edward Azar, have identified possible solutions to protracted social conflicts as reliant upon an alternative[24] view that "posits that politics is about collective security, community building and prosperity"[25]. Azar's continuous research of internal, regional and international conflict around the world since World War II has concluded, that mankind will continuously live in a constant state of perpetual war if the politics of power and power relations are sustained[26]. It is only through the introduction of effective conflict management through cooperation, inclusiveness, the pursuit of economic development and facilitation of peaceful interactions at all levels, that cycles of conflict can be controlled and eventually resolved[27].

As was noted earlier and similarly to Azar's alternative political approach towards protracted social conflicts, women's practices in conflict areas have been reflecting a

---

[22] Tickner, 60.
[23] Ibid., 60-61
[24] Alternative to the notion of political realism where conflict is over scarce goods and values.
[25] Edward Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict* (Hampshire, U.K.: Dartmouth, 1990), 1.
[26] Ibid., 1
[27] Ibid., 1-2

complementing or even alternative force to the men that are traditionally involved in waging the war, exercising power and violence and, eventually, negotiating the peace. Certainly some extraordinary men have changed the course of history with their peacemaking; likewise, a few belligerent women have made it to the top of the political ladder, or, at the grass-roots level, have taken the roles of suicide bombers or soldiers. Yet, exceptions aside, women are often the most powerful voices for moderation in times of conflict.

The success of women in overcoming difficult situations of bridging gaps where others have failed is often attributed to the certain set of feminine skills that are particularly conducive to overcoming conflict situations. Betty Reardon, a feminist scholar, argues that:

> *"...millennia of strict role separation, women in the private realm of the home and men in the public realm of the political economy, have produced within the private realm modes of accommodating differences and mediating conflict that not only preserve relationship but also contribute to the health and the development of the group"*[28].

Women's different way of thinking and learning, as community builders, allows them to address the unique traits and values of "the other" or "the different". In conflicts, when tensions are high, each group is stereotyped by the other side, thus emphasizing the differences in identity, culture, physical traits, etc. As "connected knowers"[29], who tend to learn most within, and in relation to, community, women bring to bear their own identity, culture and values, thus allowing themselves, and "the other" the space to get

---

[28] Reardon, 24-25
[29] "Connected knowers" tend to learn most in, and in relation to, community. Ibid., 141.

acquainted. This attribute is particularly significant to learning for global community building, whether in times of war or peace[30].

Women's unique contribution in areas of conflicts may very well be linked to the power relations that women themselves experience within their respective societies. As "second class citizens"[31], they are often deprived of their own needs and can relate to the marginalized group within the conflict. The state's impact on women's lives is often an additional source of frustration as well, as resources will be budgeted according to primarily security needs, thus taking away economic and other benefits from the weaker parts of society which include more women than men. Finally, differences between women within the same society – religious, socio-economic, political, etc. – may lead to further frustrations as one group of women may be the dominant one and have more opportunities relative to others.

Women's more collaborative and consensual approach – relative to men - and their role as family nurtures, establish their high stakes in maintaining their communities' stability. Their familiarity with the needs of their respective communities, particularly over time while the men are away, puts them in a unique position as an untapped resource for either predicting the acceptance of peace initiatives or brokering them themselves.

For example, in interactive problem-solving workshops, women have been identified as having relevant skills for the pre-negotiations and the negotiations phases, where there is often a need for building relationship, creating trust, and overcoming breakdowns by keeping the parties engaged. The particular skills identified for effective peacemaking,

---

[30] Ibid., 141-142

[31] The use of quotation marks is necessary to clarify that it is not, necessarily, a legally established status, but rather a social construct that exists both in western cultures or the developing world, reflected typically in social, political and economic practices.

such as excellent interaction and communications skills, facilitation ability, joint problem solving, empathy and relationship development – all have been identified, yet again, as particularly prevalent in women[32].

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been one of the world's most protracted conflicts and still continues today. Over the years, women have been participating in peace activities, bringing a different, albeit sometimes radical approach, to resolving the conflict. Understanding the particular social and political setting women peace activists work in, will enable to identify the challenges and serve as a basis for a proposed solution, i.e capitalizing on women's traditional roles as their strengths.

The following chapter covers the development of women peace activism in Israel.

---

[32] For discussion of the available data: Eileen F. Babbitt and Tamara Pearson d'Estree, "Women and the art of peacemaking: Data from Israeli-Palestinian Interactive Problem-Solving Workshops," *Political Psychology* 19, no. 1 (Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998): 188-191

II. WOMEN'S PEACE ACTIVISM IN ISRAEL

"The liberation of women…is seen as a threat to national security"[33].

The above quote from Marcia Freedman, one of the founders of the Israeli feminist movement and a former Member of Knesset, epitomizes the main challenge for women as part of Israeli society in general, whether feminists or not, and as peace activists in particular. In order to understand the context in which women's peace organizations exist in Israel, it is important to learn about the development of the movement and the reasons that contributed to its establishment.

The development of women's peace activism in Israel is directly linked to the Israeli Feminist movement's conscious decision to disassociate itself from peace issues, women's invisibility within the mixed-gender Israeli peace camp and the emotional impact, particularly on women, of the 1987 Intifada.

2.1 Contributing Factor: The Israeli Feminist Movement Avoiding Peace Issues

The establishment of the State of Israel as the realization of the Zionist dream, carried with it very distinct notions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations. Following a (modern) history of persecution and weakness of the Jewish people in Europe and elsewhere, the newly emerged Zionist Jew was justifiably strong, tough, courageous and militarily aggressive[34]. The vision of "Never Again" associated with the cry of the Holocaust survivors to avenge the death of 6 million of their fellow men, women and children, created a need to be one step ahead before "those who are out to get us" – to attack first, before being attacked. Although the Zionist project, much like other

---

[33] Marcia Freedman, *Exile in the Promised Land: A Memoir* (New York: Fireband Books, 1990), 108

[34] Simona Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," *Middle East Report*, no. 207 (1998): 25

nationalist projects, has provided women with a compelling vision of a collective

identity, with a community in which they can be members and political participants,

Israeli women were, for the most part, confined to their roles as mothers, nurturers, and

those who kept the home-front in tact while their husbands and sons were fighting for the

national Zionist cause[35]. Israeli women thus accepted their role, putting, as often happens

in situations of national struggles, the advancement of the national cause at stake before

their own political, social and legal advancement within society[36]. Given the perception

of women liberation as a threat to national security, as noted earlier, it was not difficult to

understand why the women's movement in Israel has remained relatively small, with

only few women getting into public politics.

The emergence of the feminist movement among Jewish women in Israel was inspired by

a "new wave" of feminism in the United States and Europe, in the late 1960's and early

1970's, and was introduced in Israel by Ashkenazi women with links in those countries[37].

The early period was characterizes mainly by conciseness-raising projects and small

group discussions that addressed women's first hand experience as members of Jewish-

Israeli society and the oppressive gender relations within it[38]. Still, it was only a small

minority of urban women who started exploring feminism and gender inequalities, while

the majority of civil society continued conforming to the "recruited" activism that

reflected the nationalist public feeling[39]. As a result of the largely marginalized feminist

activity in Israel that focused primarily on gender inequalities, many feminist did not

---

[35] Ibid., 25

[36] Cynthia Cockburn, The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict (London: Zed Books, 1998), 118

[37] Simona Sharoni, Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 102.

[38] Cockburn, 119

[39] Ibid., 120

even address the question of the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. One of

the first attempts to link issues of war and peace to gender inequalities within Israeli

society occurred with the 1977 establishment of the Women's Party by Marcia Freedman

and other leading figures of the feminist movement in Israel. The party's platform,

highlighting the resource misallocation towards dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict and

away form crucial social problems, was received with nearly uniform hostility[40]:

> *"The majority of Israeli society was not ready to hear the principled*
>
> *positions of women who not only challenged the prevailing political*
>
> *priorities but also linked their own oppression with the oppression of*
>
> *others, especially Palestinians both in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza*
>
> *strip"*[41].

The party was disbanded the same year it was established, after it failed to receive

enough votes in the national elections.

By the 1980's, the feminist movement in Israel made a conscience decision to avoid the

controversy over the future of the Palestinian territories, between those who supported an

"end to the occupation" and those who believed in the idea of "Greater Israel"[42]. The

rationale behind this decision, which for some was painful and ideologically inconsistent,

was that the fledgling Israeli feminist movement will never "take off" if it adopted a pro-

peace agenda, thus alienating many in the Israeli public. The decision caused those

women who wanted to be involved in peace activism to search for and/or establish

alternative organizations:

---

[40] Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," 25
[41] Ibid., 25
[42] Gila Svirsky , "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," in Israel." In *Jewish Feminism in Israel – Some Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Kalpana Misra and Melanbie S. Rich (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 115

"…Israeli feminists sought ways to mute the geopolitical issues and to highlight women's rights, narrowly understood – leaving peace issues to peace organizations, even women's peace organizations, and excluding them from the general feminist agenda…Thus, women who wanted to engage the issue of Arab-Israeli conflict in an NGO (nongovernmental organization) setting had to do so outside of the feminist movement"[43].

Some small numbers found their way into the three women-only organizations that were established before the first *Intifada – Gesher* (in English: "Bridge"), the *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (WILPF) and the *Movement of Democratic Women in Israel* (MDWI) (TANDI)[44]. These organizations were either small, like *Gesher* and WILPF, or marginalized like TANDI due to its mostly Arab-Israeli composition[45], and thus left women's peace activism largely unnoticed.

With no direct and official affiliation between peace activism and the feminist movement in Israel, women peace activists were looking to voice their political protest within the growing, mostly mixed-gender "peace camp".

2.2 Contributing Factor: Women's Invisibility within the Israeli Peace Camp

Israel's poor performance in the 1973 Yom Kippur war reduced the level of national confidence in Israeli leadership and political consensus, and transformed opposition and public protest into legitimate political tools. By the late 1970's, the polarization between proponents of "end the occupation" and proponents of "Greater Israel" grew wider over

---

[43] Ibid., 115
[44] Ibid., 116
[45] Ibid., 116

the Likud government's occupation and settlement policy[46]. That era marked the beginning of what came to be known in Israel as the "peace camp"[47]. The outbreak of the 1987 *Intifada* further strengthened the size and legitimacy of the peace camp, which numbered 170 different groups by the end of 1989[48]. The *Intifada* prompted many women to join the mixed-gender peace organizations, until it seemed that they constituted most of the rank and file within those organizations, in addition to setting up several women-only groups[49].

The largest group within the peace camp was *Shalom Ahshav* (in English: "Peace Now"), a mixed-gender group which emerged in 1977 to express public support for the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, and publicize the dangers to Israel of the continuous occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip[50]. Although many women took part in the activities *Shalom Ahshav* had organized[51], they were often behind the scenes as foot-soldiers, or as tokens on the stage at public rallies:

> *"...when it came to public spokes people, Peace Now either had no*
>
> *woman at all, a token woman, an unnamed woman moderator, or a*
>
> *woman whose job was to sing "The song of peace" at the end. There were*
>
> *no panels of female speakers, as there were of male speakers. Women*
>
> *were active but invisible"[52].*

---

[46] Ibid., 115

[47] Ayala Emmet, *Our sisters' Promised Land* (Anne Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 4

[48] Naomi Chazan, "Israeli Women and Peace Activism," in *Calling the Equality Bluff – Women in Israel*, eds. Barbara Swirski and Marilyn P. Safir (New York: Pergamon Press, 1991), 52

[49] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 116

[50] Juliet J. Pope, "The Emergence of a Joint Israeli-Palestinian Women's Peace Movement During the Intifadah," in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation*, ed. Haleh Afshar (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1993),173

[51] Shalom Ahshav organized mass demonstration, debates with leading Palestinian activists, and visits to Palestinian towns and cities. Ibid., 173

[52] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 116

This led to criticism among women who felt their role within the movement was marginalized, both at the practical level as well as symbolically. As one activist described:

> *"When the Intifada began, Peace Now started putting adverts in the newspapers with the slogan, "The Future is in your Hands", but the accompanying photograph showed a man holding a child on his shoulders. "But where were the women?", we though, Where were we? We were completely out of the picture!"[53]*

It wasn't until the 1990's, over a decade after *Shalom Ahshav* was established, that women attained a public role within the organization, following persistent complaints on part of women both from within and from other feminist organizations such as *Women in Black*[54].

Women's invisibility in Israeli political life in general and the mixed-gender peace camp in particular has been cited as one of the leading reason for the proliferation of women's peace groups, particularly following the outbreak of the Intifada. As Naomi Chazan, a peace researcher and former Knesset member, has noted in a 1989 interview to the Jerusalem Post:

> *"Women have been blocked from leadership positions in other political organizations…It is crucial for women to have the power to express themselves politically. That is why they've gravitated toward these new movements"[55]*

---

[53] Pope, 174
[54] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 116
[55] Randi Jo Land, "A Separate Peace?," *Jerusalem Post*, June 29

2.3 Contributing Factor: The Outbreak of the 1987 Intifada

The start of the Palestinian *Intifada* was a watershed for women's peace activism in Israel, capturing the imagination of thousands of women – many of whom have not been politically active previously[56]:

> "...whereas pre-Intifada attempts by Israeli women to organize as women were unable to challenge seriously the prevailing patriarchal order and mobilize large numbers of women, the Intifada sparked the emergence of numerous exclusively female peace groups"[57]

The seven women-only peace organizations established after the first *Intifada* often presented more radical position than was accepted within the mainstream peace camp,[58] and did not settle for organizing the occasional rally to protest against government policies. Almost all of them had a component that involved interaction and dialogue with Palestinian women:[59]

- SHANI (*Israeli Women's Alliance Against the Occupation*), Reshet (*Women's Network for the Advancement of Peace*) and NELED (*Israeli Women for Co-Existence*) were established to promote dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian women from different social and political strata on both sides and did so in a variety of settings (social meeting; professional seminars; solidarity visits; etc).

- *The Women's Organization for Women Political Prisoners* sought to address the special problems Palestinian women had during their imprisonment in Israeli jails for their *Intifada* activity. They maintained contacts between the prisoners and

---

[56] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 116
[57] Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," 26
[58] Emmet, 5
[59] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 127-128

their families, helped out with getting more nutritious food for pregnant women and dealt with sexual harassment complaints during interrogations.

- "The Peace Cloth" (also referred to as the "Peace Quilt") was a project of 5,000 women from all over Israel who sent in squares of cloth, expressing their individual statement about peace, to create a "Peace Cloth" to cover future negotiations tables. According to Gila Svirsky, although the "Peace Cloth" was presented to the government, it was never used in Oslo, Washington, Amman, Cairo, or any other negotiating site[60]

- *Women in Black* (on which will be elaborated later) adopted the Friday afternoon vigils as their main and almost exclusive activity, focusing primarily on the act of protest and raising public awareness

- *Women and Peace Coalition* was the main coordinating body for the women's peace organizations, which was responsible for many of the conferences, joint actions, and networking among the Israeli peace activists and across the border with Palestinian women. In its capacity as coordinating body, the organization was active both nationally and internationally

All groups emphasized a women's perspective on peace, where gender was considered a ground on which the women could jointly stand together overcoming the differences[61]. Their activism was touched by a personal and empathetic approach with a focused on "the other", albeit notably different than that of the mixed-gender groups. As a (male) journalist was quoted:

---

[60] Ibid., 128
[61] Emmet, 5

"While Peace Now and other left wing movements agonized over what the occupation was doing to Israeli society, women peace activists entered the territories in the early days of the Intifada to see what the occupation was doing to the local population, to express sympathy for their suffering, and to understand and dialogue with the Palestinians, based on personal contact"[62].

Research on the abundance of women's-only peace groups that appeared after the beginning of the first *Intifada,* alludes, among other things, to the possible emotional impact on women as they watched a people's struggle, including women and children, evolve before their eyes; one very different from the traditional war of military versus military[63]:

"The footage of children being beaten, of women marching in front of the stone throwers, of poverty and oppression brought about by Israeli society, whether by omission or commission – all evoked strong feelings among Israeli women, some out of rising defensiveness and other out of compassion. These feelings were compounded by the distress that it was "our men" – brothers, sons, fathers – who were sent to put down the teenagers, the women, the mob"[64]

Some of the organizations mentioned above have since dispersed, as during the 1990's the relationships between Israelis and Palestinians went through the twists and turns of politics, power relations, terror attacks and international diplomacy. Over the course of

---

[62] Yoram Harpaz, "They Don't Shoot, They Don't Cry," *Kol Ha'ir*, March 10, 1989.
[63] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 118-120
[64] Ibid., 118

time, other groups were formed, among them *Bat Shalom* (of the Jerusalem Link),

Mothers and Women for Peace and *New Profile*.

2.4 Current situation

The newest organization within the women's peace movement in Israel is the *Coalition of Women for a Just Peace*[65]. Established shortly after the start of the 'al-Aqsa Intifada', the nine organizations' coalition[66] decided to work in coordination, support each other's peace work and collaborate on different levels in order to create a larger movement-like impact. As Gila Svirsky writes:

> *"the cooperative spirit was a direct product of the sense of urgency we each felt about doing things, and not just talking. We were determined to use our combined strength to make a powerful statement"*[67].

The coalition is currently the largest umbrella-organization of women's peace movement in Israel and reflects very much the disparities and the activism, despite the unofficial end of the *al-Aqsa Intifada*. Svirsky's collaborative spirit, mentioned above, produced the coalition's principles which, considering the wide scope of representation within the coalition – from Zionist to non-Zionist women's organizations[68], was not easy to achieve. From the principles listed below, the commitment of the coalition to addressing the

---

[65] Further reference about the coalition available from www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org
[66] Bat Shalom, The Fifth Mother, Machsom Watch, Noga – Feminist Journal, Neled – Women for Co-Existence, New Profile – Movement for the Civil-ization of Israeli society, TANDI – the Movement of Democratic Women for Israel, WILPF – The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and Women in Black
[67] Gila Svirsky, "Feminist Peace Activism during the al-Aqsa Intifada," in *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontations: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocations*, eds. Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002) , 236
[68] Ibid., 237

deprivation of basic human needs for both Palestinians in the territories and for citizens'

of the State of Israel, is clearly evident[69]:

1. An end to the occupation.

2. The full involvement of women in negotiations for peace.

3. Establishment of the State of Palestine side by side with the state of Israel based

    on the 1967 borders.

4.   The recognition of Jerusalem as the shared capital of two states.

5. Israel must recognize its share of responsibility for the results of the 1948 war,

    and cooperate in finding a just solution for the Palestinian refugees.

6. Equality, inclusion and justice for Palestinian citizens of Israel.

7. Opposition to the militarism that permeates Israeli society.

8. Equal rights for women and all residents of Israel.

9. Social and economic justice for Israel's citizens and integration in the region.

In their actions, coalition activists pursue the same principles. In their joint

demonstrations, they protest against the occupation and the closures, emphasizing how

these are depriving Palestinians of access to medical care, food and supplies, jobs and

education. Their messages are "end the occupation", "closure kills", "closure starves" or

"closure creates enemies"[70]. They are involved in monitoring human rights abuses at

checkpoints, as well as settlement activity on Palestinian land; they negotiate the

bulldozing down of whole orchards by Israeli heavy machinery, trying to maintain

Palestinians' livelihood; they physically try to stop house demolitions or fill up trenches

---

[69] Principles available from www.coalitionofwomen4peace.org
[70] Svirsky, "Feminist Peace Activism during the al-Aqsa Intifada," 242

that make roads impassable. One of the more difficult tasks is fulfilling the need for security both for themselves, but particularly for Palestinians who continue living under the occupation even when the women of the coalition leave the area. Gila Svirsky writes about the aftermath of a successful trench-filling activity in the village of Rantis:

> *"The Army has returned,…and used their heavy machinery to dig out*
>
> *fresh trenches…Tomorrow, five of us will go to Rantis to document the*
>
> *new damage and talk to the villagers. We'll also be thinking about how to*
>
> *continue to subvert the oppression without jeopardizing the Palestinians*
>
> *themselves…".*

The increasingly visible peace activism of women in the period of the *al-Aksa Intifada* is quite simply explained: the weakening of the Israeli "peace camp", due to the post Oslo notion of 'there is no partner on the other side", allowed for women, who sustained their peace activism throughout, much room for activity[71]. Nonetheless, women's peace activism is still associated with feminist activity, whether the women define themselves as such or not, which still poses a challenge in gaining legitimacy and support from the many who see it as a threat to national security:

> *"…some Israelis, including most nationalists, assert that any linkage*
>
> *between feminism and international peace poses a threat to national*
>
> *security. One argument is that such a linkage fosters sympathy for the*
>
> *country's enemies, who, according to nationalist analyses, cannot be*
>
> *trusted and in all probability remain committed to the destruction of the*
>
> *Jewish state. Another is that it could, if pursued to its logical conclusion,*
>
> *result in a feminist-inspired pacifism that would reduce support for the*

---

[71] Hedva Isachar, ed., *Sisters in Peace: Feminist Voices of the Left* (Tel Aviv: Fetish, 2003), 12

military, at least among women and possibly among many men as well.

And still a third assertion, common to other countries faced with a foreign

enemy, is that feminism may accentuate societal divisions and undermine

national solidarity. For all of these reasons, recent gains notwithstanding,

the analyses of Israeli feminists have frequently been brushed aside in the

name of national security.[72]

 Although the Israeli-Arab conflict has seen many changes in mindset and attitudes,

processes and international involvement, in 2005 Israel, women peace activists are still

dealing with the same inequality and marginalization of the past three decades.

The following chapter will focus on a comparison between two women peace

organizations in Israel – Women in Black and Machsom Watch. Out of the organizations

currently active in Israel, I found these two most representative of the two ends of the

spectrum – Women in Black as an exclusively protest organization, and Machsom Watch

a protest organizations (in the form of monitoring human rights violations at

checkpoints), with an added component that reflects women' traditional roles in Israeli

society. It was my belief that through analyzing these two organizations, it will be

possible to capture as much of the argument at hand.

---

[72] Mark Tessler and Ina Warriner, 250-254

III. WOMEN IN BLACK AND MACHSOM WATCH: A COMPARISON

As mentioned before, the purpose of the comparison between *Women in Black* and *Machsom Watch* is to analyze whether peace activism, that makes use of women's perceived traditional roles in conflict areas - nurturers, mediators, and problem-solvers, adds to the success and legitimacy of the activity. The implications of actively going against women's perceived traditional roles will also be considered. The following analysis will touch upon several aspects of the two organizations, starting with a brief history and description of the activities of each, in order to reach a conclusion relevant within the Israeli social context, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

3.1 Getting to Know the Organizations

3.1.1 Women in Black

The Women in Black movement was inaugurated by a group of fifteen women, in Jerusalem, in January 1988, about a month after the first *Intifada* broke out. The founders of *Women in Black* were members of the mixed-gender radical left peace movement *Dai Lakibush* (in English: "End the Occupation"), and their activity was originally not intended to be gender distinct[73]. The plan was to attract attention to the protest against the occupation by creating a theatrical effect - women were to wear black and men were supposed to wear white. After the men failed to wear the white clothes, the women, who were dressed in black, soon realized that they drew substantial attention from passersby which turned the vigils into a women-only activity. The movement's central and almost exclusive activity was weekly demonstrations held every Friday afternoon (between 1-2pm) at fixed locations throughout the country, typically major road intersection where

---

[73] Gila Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 114

they were clearly viewed by passing cars and people. Within weeks following the first

vigil in Jerusalem, by word of mouth, women throughout Israel had heard about this form

of protest, and launched dozens of vigils[74]. Their minimalist form of protest has remained

their trademark – the weekly vigils at major intersections, wearing black clothing and

raising a black sign in the shape of a hand with white lettering that reads "End the

Occupation", in Hebrew, Arabic and English[75]. They do not carry a vocal protest, they do

not ask the drivers to honk their horns for solidarity. They simply stand and make sure

that no one forgets that the occupation must end. It is estimated that during its peak years

(1988-1991), the *Women in Black* movement in Israel was 5,000 women strong who

stood at roughly 39 different vigils around the country on any regular basis[76]. Following

the signing of the Oslo Accords and the beginning of the peace process between Israel

and the Palestinians, the movement was officially disbanded in 1994[77], and resumed

activity in 2000, following the outbreak of the *al-Aksa Intifada*[78]. As of 2005, there are

only seven active *Women in Black* vigils in Israel[79].

---

[74] Since 1988, Women in Black has become an international women's movement with vigils held around the world in the same manner that it was initiated across Israel. The vigils are not always related to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, although some vigils do. The common theme all vigils share is their uncompromising commitment to justice and a world free of violence. This paper, however, will not focus on the international standing of the movement but rather on its establishment as a women's initiated organization in Israel, and its success within Israeli society.

[75] Russian was later added, following the influx of over 1 million Jewish immigrants who came to Israel during the 1990's from the former Soviet Republics.

[76] This estimate is based on Gila Svirsky's informal census which she took during her time as a Woman in Black, since an official headcount was not available. Gila Svirsky, "The Impact of Women in Black in Israel", in *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War and Resistance*, eds. Marguerite R. Waller and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 244

[77] Sara Helman and Tamar Rapoport, "Women in Black: Challenging Israel's Gender and Socio-political Orders," *The British Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 4 (1997) : 683

[78] Orna Sasson-Levy and Tamar Rapoport, "Body, Gender, and Knowledge in Protest Movements: The Israeli Case," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 3 (2003): 384

[79] Website of Coalition of Women for Peace, Women in Black link: http://coalitionofwomen.org/home/english/organizations/women_in_black

3.1.2 Machsom Watch

Machsom Watch (in English: "Checkpoint Watch") was founded in January 2001 in

response to repeated reports in the press about human rights abuses of Palestinians

crossing army and border police checkpoints. Following Israel's response to the *Al-Aksa*

Intifada, which included closures and sieges of Palestinian cities, towns and villages,

three Jewish Israeli women took the initiative to let the Israeli public know what is going

on a short ride away from Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. Ronnee Jaeger, a long time

Human Rights activist with experience in Guatemala and Mexico, Adi Kuntsman a

feminist scholar who emigrated from the former Soviet Union in 1990 and veteran

activist Yehudit Keshet, an orthodox Jewess, decided to act. According to the

organization's spokeswoman, Adi Dagan, after four years of activity *Machsom Watch*

now boasts 500 women all over the country[80]. On their letterhead they are described as

"Women for Human Rights" and "Women Against the Occupation". Their logo is a

watchful wide open eye, which might bear the inscription: "No to the Checkpoints!"

The *Machsom Watch* women have created teams of three or four observers, and serve in

two- to three-hour shifts at about 30 different checkpoints[81] during rush hours: early in

the morning, when hundreds of Palestinian schoolchildren and workers have to pass

through, and late in the afternoon, when they return home. As Israeli citizens and non-

settlers, they are not allowed into Palestinian controlled territories[82], but they can observe

what is going on at the various checkpoints surrounding the territories. By observing,

Machsom Watch volunteers hope to ensure the human rights of the civilians passing

---

[80] Interview with Machsom Watch spokeswoman, Adi Dagan, April 2005
[81] Ibid.
[82] Territories that are also known as "A", and are under exclusive Palestinian control, as opposed to areas marked "B" or "C" where different levels of security and governance are in the hands of the Israelis.

through. The collected data from the checkpoints is passed on to various human rights organizations, to Knesset[83] members, to military commanders and to the general public. A monthly report is published on the organization's website, as part of their attempt to raise public awareness to the unbearable and unpredictable reality at the checkpoints. While on the ground, their identifying badge reads "m" in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, and they make a point of introducing themselves to the soldiers at the checkpoint upon their arrival, making there presence known, and their monitoring overt.

3.2 Similarities: Activists' Profiles, Political Inclusiveness and the Challenge to the Security Discourse

Aside from both *Women in Black* and *Machsom Watch* being gender based, the two organizations share a common basic premise - the opposition to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and the call to end it. Their shared political agenda, allows for similarities between the two, particularly in the profile of its members, as well as their politically inclusive approach that allows as many women as possible to join, as long as they oppose the occupation and are willing to actively protest against it.

3.2.1 Activists' Profiles

The purpose of *Women in Black* when it was first established was two fold: (1) to protest the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories and the endless cycle of violence and oppression between Israelis and Palestinians, and (2) raise and maintain public awareness of the concomitant moral corruption of Israeli society[84]. The vigils, which reflected *Women in Black*'s almost exclusive activity for achieving its purposes, brought

---

[83] Israel's Parliament.
[84] Helman and Rapoport, 683

together women from a wide-spectrum of beliefs represented within the Israeli peace camp[85]:

> " *from anti-Zionists, to left-wing Zionists, from Communists, Trotskyites*
>
> *and anarchists to members of the Citizen's Rights Movement. They*
>
> *comprised women who viewed themselves as feminists as well as those*
>
> *who rejected this definition. Young women stood beside old (at times*
>
> *mothers and daughters)"[86].*

Nonetheless, the diversity in beliefs within the Israeli peace camp represented by the composition of the *Women in Black* activists was complemented by a highly similar socio-economic, ethnic, and educational background, which reflected Israel's social and cultural elite. The Jerusalem vigil was the first and the largest, and served as a model vigil for other groups throughout Israel, as well as a source of research about the movement as a whole. The thorough analysis that was done of the *Women in Black* phenomenon, based on the Jerusalem vigil, revealed the following[87]:

> *"The Woman in Black is secular (90%) of Ashkenazi decent (99%) holds*
>
> *Israeli citizenship (93.8%), is educated (85.7 % hold and academic degree*
>
> *mostly in the humanities), close to her fifties (median age = 47) and works*
>
> *for a living (85% - 64.8% are salaried workers and the rest are self*
>
> *employed). More than half (55%) live without a spouse and 25% have no*

---

[85] This is based on the Jerusalem vigil which was the largest and served as the original model for the vigils that spurred around the country and the world. Ibid., 683
[86] Ibid., 683
[87] Ibid., 683

children. In her youth, the Woman in Black was a member of a youth

movement (72%) and to this day she continues to be politically active"[88]

As a human rights monitoring organization, *Machsom Watch* adopted three goals upon its

establishment[89]: (1) Monitor the behavior of soldiers and police at checkpoints

(2) Ensure that the human and civil rights of Palestinians attempting to enter Israel are

protected (3) Record and report the results of the observations to the widest possible

audience, from the decision-making level to that of the general public.

Here again, the goals reflect a commitment to human rights and the opposition to the

abuse of power relations at checkpoints, as well as a determination to raise public

awareness about the possible abuses done by Israeli soldiers and police in the name of

security. Although little statistical research has been done to establish an accurate profile

of the "MachsomWatchers", it is easy to identify the similarities. On the *Machsom Watch*

Website, the activists are profiled as follows:

> *"Machsomwatchers comprise a wide spectrum of ages and backgrounds,*
>
> *with a definite bias towards mature, professional women. All members are*
>
> *Israeli. The group is politically pluralistic within the context of opposition*
>
> *to the occupation and a commitment to human rights."*

Like the *Women in Black*, the women of *Machsom Watch* are older and for the most part

educated professionals: *"Many of them are over sixty, from established families, with*

sons and daughters that served or are serving in the army. Quite a few have

grandchildren"[90]. They are described as "women who one day woke up with the

---

[88] Ibid., 683

[89] Available from http://www.machsomwatch.org/eng/aboutUsEng.asp?link=aboutUsEng&lang=eng

[90] Sima Kadmon, "Many Mothers," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, November 21, 2003; available from Machsom Watch Website http://www.machsomwatch.org/media/simaKadmonEng.asp?link=media&lang=eng

realization that they needed to do something", so they do not necessarily have a background of political activism[91]. Some of them are also active in the *Women in Black* organization and in other protest groups[92], which may account for a certain level of similarity in profile. All members are Israeli and the group is politically pluralistic, although they all share an opposition to the occupation and a commitment to human rights[93].

3.2.2 Political Inclusiveness

An interesting trait the two organizations share is their political inclusiveness which allows women to join in on the activities regardless of their political bias, as long as they are committed to the goal of ending the occupation and the particular activities each organization is engaged in.

For *Women in Black*, the adoption of a single slogan – "End the Occupation" – was one of the initial principles decided upon at the outset. The rationale behind it was to unite women from a variety of different religious and political persuasions who might not have agreed to other slogans that advocated more specific solutions[94].   The general statement of stop the occupation, actually allows each woman to stand at the vigil holding on to her own agenda, whatever that agenda may be. Women could be holding onto a sign of "End the Occupation" while their interpretation of it may be, "because Palestinians deserve a State like we do", "because it is ruining the moral values of the Israeli society", or "because we, as mothers and life givers, do not wish to send our boys off to die". On the

---

[91] Ibid.
[92] Tom Segev , "Women of the Checkpoints,", *Ha'aretz*, August 10, 2002; available from Machsom Watch Website
[93] Available from Machsom Watch Website
http://www.machsomwatch.org/eng/aboutUsEng.asp?link=aboutUsEng&lang=eng
[94] Pope, 175

individual level then, women may be standing at the vigils expressing their traditional view as mothers and life-givers, yet at the group level, what is projected to the public is a group of women challenging an existing political sore spot[95].

This notion was particularly apparent in the words of Deborah (fictitious name), a "woman in black":

> *"I'm standing in protest because of my sons so they need not perform their military service in the occupied territories. What do I care if one woman is out there because of her feminism, and another wants to prove to the male dominated society that women can and men can't maintain a protest over a long period of time and that the violent street symbolizes the male side, as it were, and another loves the Palestinians because they are human beings and she wants them to live like us? What do I care why they're out there? …The truth is, I never looked into the matter too much"[96]*

Machsom Watch adopted the same approach of political inclusiveness, emphasizing the commitment to ending the occupation as the activists' common denominator. As Yehudit Elkana from Jerusalem, one of the first women to join *Machsom Watch* said in an interview: *"If a settler wants to join us, for humanitarian reasons, we refer her to other organizations"[97]*. The organization is not politically identified with any party, and allows its activists to participate with her own voice and style, while providing a support group for dialogue and discourse, or when the events unfolding take their emotional toll[98].

---

[95] Helman and Rapoport, 687
[96] Ibid., 687
[97] Kadmon.
[98] Ibid.

3.2.3 Challenging the Secuirty Discourse in Israel – as Citizens and as Women

The challenge both organizations pose in their protest to the militaristic discourse in Israel is twofold: both as citizens and as women.

As civic groups, both organizations question government policies and the notion of Israel's security at the price of controlling millions of Palestinians through the means of an occupation, which necessarily jeopardizes the lives and morals of the soldiers serving in the territories. Israel's uncertain security situation, accompanied by the fatalistic notion of the Jewish State fighting for its survival against the Arab world around it, has created a militaristic culture where the authority of high ranking officers and politicians, who themselves have been on the battle field, is often left unquestioned. The first criticism against government security policies was expressed only following the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, once Israel's wars began to seem less like a matter of national survival and more like military adventurism[99]. Although over the past two decades the level of transparency in government practices has increased significantly - due to advanced technology, development of the media and the strengthening of the Israeli democracy - the political and security discourses are still monopolized by soldiers and officers, making it still hard to challenge.

The establishment of *Women in Black* was in-and-of-itself a citizens' protest against the government's policies in the territories following the outbreak of the 1987 *Intifada.* As images of the gun-toting Israeli soldiers confronted by the stone-throwing Palestinian youth flooded the Israeli media, Israeli extra-parliamentary peace and protest groups, both mixed-gender and women-only, were established, reaching a staggering 110 groups

---

[99] Cockburn, 122

by the end of 1989[100]. Yet *Women in Black* in particular challenged the security discourse mainly in their innovative form of protest. By using a simple, almost catchy slogan with no additional explanations, by standing in silence and not responding to provocation or even offering the opportunity to debate, and by maintaining a regular and predictable vigil, serving as a public reminder about the violent response to the *Intifada – Women in Black* have defied any formerly known form of civic protest in Israeli society. The lack of debate around the ending of the occupation, its implications for Israeli society and security, and even the simplicity, in which the idea was presented in public, may have undermined the security discourse all together. For a country in which security plays such a central part of its identity and history, inability to discuss security issues, state one's views, or accept such a simplistic solution for what is perceived to be crucial and complex – these are almost impossible to have. The constant meddling with Israel's security, leads to endless debates and arguments as a form of venting out frustrations and fears, as if the debate itself creates new possibilities on the ground. In their silence, *Women in Black* did not provide the space for it. Additionally, *Women in Black* served as a constant reminder of the occupation – something many Israeli citizens would have preferred to forget. Although their presence as women in the public sphere has had a resenting impact on passersby, some responses referred to their mere protest against government policies, regardless of gender:

> *"Okay. [Protest] is allowed. But it shouldn't go on for one, two, three,*
>
> *four or five years. It's fine by me if it's once or twice. Even three times. Do*
>
> *they think they own it? That it's their own private square? It's a central*

---

[100] Chazan, 153

public square. And they have to stand there and remind us of it every

Friday. They remind us of blackness[101]

The public was annoyed with the constant reminder of the violent policies in the

territories, the wounded, the bereavement of the dead, the guerilla-like war against

Palestinian women and children – issues every Israeli citizen would rather ignore or

forget in order to go on with life[102]

In the case of *Machsom Watch*, the organization is defined as one which challenges the

dominating security discourse in Israel, a discourse that usually takes place away from

the public eye - at checkpoints, border crossings, closed meetings of the heads of security

forces, etc:

> *"Our, quiet but assertive, presence at checkpoints is a direct challenge to*
>
> *the dominant militaristic discourse that prevails in Israeli society. It*
>
> *demands accountability on the part of the security forces towards the*
>
> *civilian estate, something hitherto almost unheard of"[103].*

The demand the *Machsom Watch* women make in their presence is one of transparency

and accountability vis-à-vis the Israeli public – no doubt a legitimate demand in a

democratic country. As Israeli citizens, the women are demanding to know the rational

behind the checkpoints as a security means. In their eyes, it is a reality of constant abuse

and harassment of a civilian population trying to conduct a life under extreme

---

[101] Part of an interview with Moshe, a taxi driver who frequently passed by the square where the Jerusalem Women in Black were holding their vigils, cited in Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 395
[102] Ibid., 395

[103] Available from Machsom Watch's website:
http://www.machsomwatch.org/eng/aboutUsEng.asp?link=aboutUsEng&lang=eng

circumstances, more than it is a means to secure the lives of the citizens of Israel

(translated from Hebrew – SDN):

> *"...first, our presence challenges the security perception of the state of*
> *Israel. Every day we see that the checkpoint has nothing to do with*
> *security. It's a little valium for the Israeli public and a lot of hassle and*
> *damage for the Palestinian population. After all, whoever wants to pass*
> *the checkpoint will sooner or later pass it. The military claims that it*
> *manages to capture people. We're not arguing with it, we're just saying,*
> *"we're citizens, and you owe us a report. We came to see what you are*
> *doing and you owe us some explanations". It's not enough that we're told*
> *"security, security"; We demand explanations."*[104]

A separate yet linked challenge to the Israeli security discourse is gender-based. As

women, the peace activists are forcing themselves into a debate in which they

traditionally have no place: the debate over security. Despite women's participation in the

Israel Defense Forces since the establishment of the state, the National Security

Community traditionally does not include women, especially not at the decision making

level. The Israeli Jewish woman is expected to contribute to Israel's national security by

being responsible for the home front, without challenging traditional roles[105]. Thus

women are still considered a marginalized group with no knowledge or ability to

contribute to the debate on Israel's security. As Nurith Gillath writes in1991 and is still

relevant today:

---

[104] Yehudit Keshet, Unnamed, in *Sisters in Peace: Feminist Voices of the Left*, ed. Hedva Isachar (Tel Aviv: Fetish, 2003), 45
[105] Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," 25

"Forty years of frequent wars and reserve duty, in which Israeli men are

called upon to protect the borders of the state and its citizens, together

with factors such as memory of the Holocaust, seem to have resulted in a

conservative, familial society, one in which women are to play the role of

devoted housewives whose major tasks are to rear the children and

cultivate a private oasis for soldiers returning from the battlefield. In such

a context, it is no simple matter for women to organize politically against

war or other security issues, perceived as exclusively male domains"[106].

The role of femininity and womanhood in both organizations is particularly important for

analyzing the use of women's perceived roles and skills as peace activists in Israel, and

will be addressed later in the research. It is however fair to say that the reactions for both

the *Women in Black* and the women of *Machsom Watch* do include expressions that

establish the traditional notions of women's involvement in security issues. For the most

part, these reactions do reflect the prevalent expectations of women, both in Israel and in

other parts of the world, to limit their political involvement to narrowly defined

"women's issues" or stay out of politics altogether[107].

3.3 The Difference:

Complementing Protest with Traditional Women's Activism on the Ground

So far some similarities have been identified between *Women in Black* and *Machsom*

Watch: both women's groups are active in Israel, with a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. Both organizations are women-only, whose activists, for the most part, share the

---

[106] Nurith Gillath, "Women Against War: Parents Against Silence," in *Calling the Equality Bluff – Women in Israel*, eds. Barbara Swirski and Marilyn P. Safir (New York: Pergamon Press, 1991), 142
[107] Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," 25

same profile and some are even active in the other organization; both organizations share a similar political platform of ending the occupation and an inclusive approach towards new activists; and they both protest against and challenge the security discourse in Israel, a realm traditionally exclusive for male politicians and members of the security forces which typically do not include women at decision making levels. Yet the activism at the checkpoints by the women of *Machsom Watch*, versus the silent protest at major intersections of *Women in Black*, is the main difference between the two organizations. Analyzing each organization's activity as a women's organization and their impact on the crowds they interact with, may shed some light on the added value, or lack thereof, of women's activism in conflict areas, and the possible contribution to establishing a culture of peace.

3.3.1 Women in Black: "Women-only" Protest as a Pragmatic Choice

As mentioned before, *Women in Black* did not start out as an all women organization. The decision to make it an all women protest activity, was a pragmatic one, after the women dressed in black standing silently at central road intersections, attracted considerable attention to the group's protest. The civic approach, i.e. women as Israeli citizens rather than women in their traditional roles as mothers, nurturers, or life-protectors, was also reflected in "the flyer", a so-called identity card that had been drawn up by a number of participants, and gained unanimous approval (my highlights – SDN):

> *"...we, the Women in Black, **citizens of the state of Israel**, have been*
>
> *holding a weekly protest vigil since the beginning of the Intifada. The*
>
> *protest vigil is **an expression of Israeli society** and expresses our need to*
>
> *actively and strongly oppose the occupation. **We are women of different***

political convictions, but the call "Stop the Occupation" unites us. We

all demand that our government take immediate action to begin

negotiations for a peace settlement….We are unified in our belief that our

*message is powerful and just and will eventually bring peace. **We call on***

all women to join us in our staunch, persistent and non-violent

***protest*"[108].**

Although the message is directed at women, there is no reference to any feminine

attribute that women in particular hold, and thus no reference to the particular role or

contribution that women bring to the vigil. There is no mention of any feminist rationale

to their activity. It almost seems like, the message could, just the same, be addressed to

men, citizens of Israel, who oppose the occupation. Further evidence for the vigils as a

civic rather than a gendered/feminist activity, was found when most (86.5%) of the

Jerusalem vigil women denied the possibility that they would leave, when asked about

their actions if men were admitted to the group[109]. To many of them it was not a feminist

activity, but rather an opportunity to work with other women rather than men: *"their wish*

was to stand with other women, and the more the group grew, the stronger they felt about

being only with other women"[110]. Nevertheless, although *Women in Black* never defined

itself as a feminist movement, the themes of feminism such as marking International

Women's Day and organizing conferences on the feminist interpretations of the peace

process, eventually found their way in[111]

---

[108] Women in Black flyer (May 1990), as mentioned in Helman and Rapoport, 684
[109] Ibid., 688
[110] Pope, 176
[111] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 122-123

3.3.2 Machsom Watch: "Women-only" Protest as a Conscious Choice

Unlike *Women in Black*, *Machsom Watch* was established as a women's movement for very particular reasons, identifying women's traditional place outside the security discourse as an advantage. The founders of *Machsom Watch* established an all-women organization, acting outside the military system, in order to both challenge it as well as relate to the soldiers without confronting them. The decision not to include men emanates, therefore, from the advantages that women bring to their activity on the ground:

> *"Machsom watch is a women's movement. ...We see our activity as one of our messages, which is our ability to stand up to the military and in our presence deliver our message. ....Since we are not part of the political system or part of the security thinking, we have an advantage over men, because we can relate to the soldiers without confronting them. Therefore we have no interest in bringing in men to join our vigils, although there were quite a few men who asked to join. We refused. Their participation would have changed the character of the activity and would have dragged us, against our will, into the militaristic discourse which men are a part of and we seek to avoid it…At any rate, it's a feminist activity, and there is a need to let women have a space where they can be active on their own, with no men"[112].*

Additionally, on a very practical level it would have been impossible to sustain *Machsom Watch*'s unique role on the ground and its interaction with the soldiers, as an "outside" organization. As Israeli men serve in the military and possibly have found themselves in

---

[112] Keshet, 46

confrontational situations with Palestinian civilians, let alone with little sleep and long

shifts at the checkpoints, it would have been difficult for the men not to relate to the

soldiers[113], with whom much of the interaction is done on the ground.

3.3.3 Women in Black: Women's Protest at the Core

The *Women in Black* movement was established as solely an organization of protest. The

vigils, as its exclusive activity, provided the activists a regular form of expressing their

dismay with government policies on the one hand, as well as raise and maintain the

public's awareness of the moral corruption of Israeli society as a result of the

occupation[114]. In their protest, *Women in Black* chose to disconnect themselves of their

perceived traditional roles as Israeli, mostly Jewish, women. Their form of protest – only-

women, silent vigils at major intersections, and wearing black clothing, went against the

acceptable notions of the role and place of the woman in Israeli society:

> "*...the mode of protest set forth by Women in Black embodied an open*
>
> *challenge to deeply ingrained notions of femininity in Israel. This mode of*
>
> *protest presented an alternative interpretation of the place of women in*
>
> *Israeli politics and society".*[115]

The social division of labor between men and women in Israel has developed since 1948

in the shadows of a struggle for national survival. While the "new Zionist Jew" came to

Israel, equipped with courage, strength, and a will to fight for the land of the Jewish

people, the women, cast as symbols of the nation, were vulnerable, needed protection and

were responsible mainly for the reproduction of the nation and for transmitting its

---

[113] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005
[114] Helman and Rapoport, 683
[115] Ibid., 685

culture[116]. Protest against government policies in times of crisis was not included in women's profile.

Although not explicitly a feminist protest and despite its cautious relations with the feminist movement in Israel[117], the *Women in Black* were perceived as feminists considering their all-women activity in a realm of war and peace which was, and still is, dominated by men in Israel. The Israeli public's general view of feminism as a threat to the State of Israel, along with the tensions of the *Intifada* generated a serious backlash within Israeli society[118], resulting in verbal and sometimes physical abuse, accompanied by both sexual and sexist innuendos targeting organizations like the *Women in Black*:

> *"The majority of the curses wedded gender to political conflict. While most of the curses were from taxi drivers[119], other men and a few women cursed as well. The drivers distinguished themselves with their crude, violent and penetrative verbal behavior, using such phrases as "fuck all of you up your ass" and "you should all be fucked and then killed". These acts were accompanied by aggressive (a fist) and sexist (a gesture symbolizing penetration) hand motion. The wedding of sexist and nationalist views is apparent in the cries "Arab fuckers" ...or "Arafat's whores…."[120]*

The choice to wear black clothing to signify the human tragedy on both the Palestinian and the Israeli sides was also a source for crude responses from passersby. The comments alluded to the women's utter betrayal of the symbolism of black clothing, strongly

---

[116] Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," 25
[117] Svirsky, "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel," 115
[118] Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," 26
[119] most of them predominantly men - SDN
[120] Helman and Rapoport, 690

associated with the bereavement of the soldiers who fought to death for the Jewish people and land, thus further linking women and nation:

> *"The most common and perhaps cruelest curse was "I hope you wear black all your life". The curser "wishes" on the woman a life of mourning as widows or bereaved mothers. The curse reverse the accepted meaning of the Israeli ethos of women's bereavement , which is traditionally tied to the figure of the tragic heroine who loses her husband or son to the just national struggle. A variation of the same theme is the saying "I hope your son dies and you won't be able to visit his grave". Inability to visit the grave of a son who falls in battle is viewed as the ultimate hardship for the family, and particularly for the bereaved mother"[121]*

Finally, the silence of the vigil only fortified the visual impact, and the anger of the immediate crowd faced with the vigil. By not shouting slogans or responding to the crowds' comments, the women "forced" the passersby to "listen" to them, rather than talk back at them[122]. The annoyance with the "silent treatment" from the women, only further de-legitimized their protest in the eyes of those who opposed their views.

3.3.3.1 Impact

It is difficult to measure what specific impact the *Women in Black* movement had on the different people they encountered, or that encountered their act of protest. Their contribution to a "culture of peace", as a women's-only peace organization active in a conflict area, may have been significant to the closer circles of people who knew the members of *Women in Black* in person, and had the opportunity to witness a personal

---

[121] Ibid., 690-691
[122] Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 385

transformation, or discuss the women's activities. According to Gila Svirsky, a *Woman in Black* herself, for the women standing in the vigils and their immediate circles[123], the vigils did serve as a step towards a "culture of peace"[124]. The women standing at the vigils became empowered, more politicized and more radicalized in their thinking, pushing themselves further left politically and more skeptical of official positions; their immediate circles (families, place of work, social circles), were captive audiences to the message of peace and became more involved, often joining the vigils themselves.

It is even more difficult to asses what the movement's impact was on the general public and beyond – such as the Palestinians in the territories.

The impact on the Palestinians measured by Svirsky is extremely limited. Considering the women's place of protest – major intersections in the heart of Israel - there was hardly any encounter or interaction with Palestinians[125], thus no opportunity to get to know "the other side", as needed in situations of conflict to reduce tensions and overcome demonization. Almost the only way the existence of a staunch women's peace activity could have gotten across to the "other side" was through the media, which did lead to the mention of *Women in Black* by both Hanan Ashrawi and President Mubarak of Egypt as a positive, peace-oriented organization[126].

The Jewish constituents, both opponents and proponents of the women's activity, were the movement's most challenging crowds to assess for impact and thus success of the organization's aims. For the "silent left" - those who supported the peace activities yet

---

[123] Svirsky mentions also the significant impact that Women in Black had at the international level, which resulted in a proliferation of vigils around the world, both related and unrelated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Svirsky, "The Impact of Women in Black in Israel," 239-241.

[124] Ibid., 237-239.

[125] For the purpose of this paper, I am not referring to Israeli-Palestinian women, who often stood with Jewish-Israeli women particularly at vigils in the north of Israel.

[126] Ibid., 241.

did not take an active part in it because they were too well-mannered or constrained by jobs or family – *Women in Black* were representatives on the streets, facing the right-wing activists at major intersections and street corners, and serving as a constant reminder that the voice of peace has not been silenced despite the high visibility and activism of the political right[127]. Although they did not need convincing to support the end of the occupation, Israelis affiliated with the "silent left" did not take the initiative to "get out there" themselves, and the silent vigils were not necessarily the means to convince them to do so. As for those who supported the occupation, some of which were passersby whose crude reactions were mentioned, the women's protest did not convince them to change their political stand, and being aware of that, the women did not attempt to do so:

> *"I have no illusions that there was a single person who disagreed with us who became convinced of our views by seeing us stand there. They were not our target audience. We did not stand on the vigil to convince Likud voters to vote Labor, nor did we hope to convince Shamir to forfeit his vision of a Greater Israel. These were obviously impossible tasks."*

Nonetheless, the interaction between the angry passersby and the Women in Black were the most public and the ones that received the media's and the public's attention. As the protests gained more publicity, the opposition became more violent and personal. Vigils in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Haifa and elsewhere were attacked by members of the racist organization, *Kach*, established by the ultra-right wing Rabbi, Meir Kahana; some women reported threatening telephone calls and letters, and the police often had to intervene or be at the scene in order to

---

[127] Ibid., 238.

keep the peace[128]. Needless to say that the publicity the *Women in Black* received,

in addition to the initial annoyance and resentment towards their unique act of

protest were not well positioned to raise public support for ending the occupation

and bringing the peace.

3.3.4 Machsom Watch: Women's Protest Complemented by Traditional Roles

Machsom Watch's primary activity is human rights monitoring at the Israeli checkpoints

around the Palestinian territories[129]. In addition to the reports and monitoring on the

ground, *Machsom Watch* has become known for the informal role played by its activists

as negotiators, mediators and overall problem-solvers at the checkpoints. Although not

explicitly defined as a purpose in-and-of-itself of the group, the women of *Machsom*

Watch, both actively and passively, serve as a mediating and calming force on the

ground:

> *"...Machsom Watch,[is] an organization whose members place*
>
> *themselves at checkpoints in an attempt to minimize, if they cannot*
>
> *altogether prevent, the daily dose of humiliation and abuse that the*
>
> *Palestinian population undergoes there.......Their task is to mitigate and*
>
> *facilitate, they say, but sometimes they exert pressure on the soldiers in*
>
> *order to resolve urgent humanitarian problems"[130].*

As their monitoring activity on the ground was established, many of the women, upon

impulse almost, started intervening as third party, mediating situations between the young

---

[128] Pope, 176

[129] As Israeli citizens, the women of Machsom Watch are not allowed to enter "A" areas or those that have been defined as "closed off military areas"

[130] Denise Bart, "Watch Out," *Zomet Hasharon*, June 6, 2004

Israeli soldiers and border police forces, and the Palestinian civilians passing through the checkpoints: *"we soon realized that just by being there, we could do a few things to help. ... It is the distress, not the politics that draw us there."*[131]

The *Machsom Watch* women do not help out at the checkpoints in an organized manner. They do not employ lawyers to deal with particular human rights issues, they do not hand out food or medicine, they do not even come at regular times so those who need them will know when to expect them. *"We are not service providers such as doctors without borders who had a "clinic on wheels". As a secondary activity, we do what we can to help out"*[132]. The women help out in many different ways and cases – they distribute water on hot summer days or even give money for a cab home on rare occasions[133], they make phone calls, talk to the soldiers or their officers, comfort the Palestinians, and they help out in humanitarian cases to reunite family members:

> *"...Daphna Banai accompanies a young family. The mother stands on the side, quietly, patiently; the father's face is sweaty and his eyes moist from anger and shame. The soldiers allow him and the children to cross but not the wife. She lacks the necessary document. The father refuses to leave without his wife. Again and again he points at the little children. "How can they leave without their mother?" he asks exasperated. Banai talks to the soldiers. She never loses her cool, her poise and her gentleness in her dealings with the checkpoint soldiers[134].*

---

[131] Kadmon.
[132] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005
[133] Bart.
[134] Kadmon.

It is important to note that this activity is complementing their human rights monitoring work, and their intention is not to interfere with soldiers following routine orders, but rather make sure that in the process human rights and dignity are preserved:

> *"...it's important for me to note that we do not interfere with what is going on, unless it's a case of clear violation: an ambulance being held, someone is beaten up, then we do interfere. We go to the soldiers and say: "what are you doing? why are you doing? how are you acting? I witnessed very few cases like that, but many people are detained..."[135]*

Much like the *Women in Black*, the women of *Machsom Watch* are out of their natural physical environment and their socially constructed roles as Israeli Jewish women. The checkpoints are considered a dangerous place, a military war-zone where unpredictable violence could erupt at any minute due to a shooting or a suicide bombing. Checkpoints are sometimes closed down altogether, regardless of those waiting to pass, because of such incidents. These areas are not the natural environment for ladies in their fifties and sixties - some of them grandmothers – running around, trying to find the right person to talk to about an ambulance carrying a pregnant Palestinian woman that needs to go through. In addition to that, they too are protesting as women against the Israeli military machine and its policies, as opposed to embracing their traditional roles as mothers, birthing the men that will protect the nation. Their resistance to the occupation is the main reason for their presence at the checkpoints and their activism:

> *"We decided to do it here because we thought it's also a good opportunity to protest against the occupation, because the checkpoint epitomizes, in fact, the occupation. That is the place where the average Palestinian, who*

---

[135] Keshet, 46

is not on a wanted list, the simple man or woman who are trying to live

their lives, face the occupation on a daily basis."[136]

Over time, the soldiers and border police have learned to fear the power, or at least feel

the pressure, of the women from *Machsom Watch*[137]. By their presence on the ground,

they serve as eyes and ears for the media and the public as a whole, and the soldiers are

aware of the impact of a cover story about abuses at the checkpoints. The women utilize

their presence to report, often in real time, about inadequate behavior and violations of

human rights, although they will claim that for the most part their presence has a

restraining effect that prevents human rights violations from happening and getting to the

media. For that, the women often pay a price in attitude from the soldiers and border

policemen:

> *"The Border Policemen have a heavy responsibility; the checks at the*
>
> *barrier cannot totally stop terrorists from entering the city. Little wonder*
>
> *that the women of the checkpoints irritate the policemen…their presence*
>
> *has a restraining effect on the police."[138]*

Nonetheless, the women feel their work is contributing to keeping the soldiers in tune not

only with their respect for human rights, but with their morals, or even sanity:

> *"I saw a soldier at Huwwara," Edna Morduch says, "who yelled at a*
>
> *Palestinian to get the hell out of there. It was quite horrible. I stood next*
>
> *to him and we talked. I asked him how long he'd been stationed at that*
>
> *post, and he said: two and a half months too many. I really felt like crying.*
>
> *I realized he was there against his will." "I engage the soldiers in*

---

[136] Ibid., 44
[137] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005
[138] Segev.

conversation," says Tsal. "I feel that when I talk to them, I help remove

the shield that makes them regard all the Palestinians in front of them as

indistinguishable lump. I make the soldiers think."[139]

To many of the women, the soldiers are victims of the system. Although they are

the ones at the "receiving end" of the women's protest and monitoring activities,

for most women the soldiers are not the enemy and the attempt is to change the

military policies through a public debate rather than one-soldier-at-a-checkpoint-

at-a-time**[140]**. The circumstances under which the soldiers stand at the checkpoints

- the fear, the lack of sleep, and often the young age and lack of life experience,

all result in frustration, impatience and intolerance to "the other" – whether

Palestinians or women[141].

The responses the women get from soldiers reflect the mixed responses that exist within

Israeli society in the context of women's protest against the occupation, as well as the

mixed impact the women may have on people around them[142]. Some responses are indeed

crude, similar to the ones that targeted the *Women in Black* vigils, emphasizing the

reduction of women to a sex object, and disregarding their protest and political stand:

"The first policeman who spotted the women insulted them in Hebrew and

then fouled his mouth with the usual Arabic words, all in a heavy Russian

accent...."Come on, come on, come over here by the side and I'll show

ya," he said to one of the women, who by her age could have been his

[139] Kadmon.
[140] Bart.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005

grandmother: "Come on, come on if you want, come on," the policeman

reiterated, heatedly, hot for a fight."[143]

Other soldiers are more cooperative, thinking that it is good for someone to keep

an eye on what happens on the ground, particularly considering that the younger

regular soldiers, often not older than 18 or 19 years, are known to be less patient

and quick to respond with punishment and violence, than the reservists who man

the checkpoints:

> *"There are marked differences between regular and reserve soldiers. They*
>
> *all get the same orders, but the reservists are considered more humane.*
>
> *They cut corners wherever possible, whereas among the regular soldiers*
>
> *you occasionally see some who derive some perverse pleasure from the*
>
> *situation. "I've seen soldiers, when a Palestinian smiles too much, or too*
>
> *little, detain the man for hours just for spite," says Maya Kesari, a*
>
> *Machsom Watch activist. "An 18 year old boy cannot understand the*
>
> *plight of a mother who tries to get her baby to a doctor and is detained,"*
>
> *says Dayan, stressing the importance of reservists' presence at the*
>
> *checkpoints. "Before we got here, regular soldiers manned the checkpoint,*
>
> *and it was a nightmare. The Palestinians want us to stay on. I dread the*
>
> *thought of what will happen when we're gone."* [144]

3.3.4.1 Impact

The impact of the women of *Machsom Watch* and their contribution to a culture of peace

in Israel is still hard to measure, partly due to the relatively short time the organization

---

[143] Segev.
[144] Bart.

has been around, as well as lack of academic literature and research on the subject. Yet borrowing from the format that was used by Gila Svirsky to qualitatively assess the impact *Women in Black* had as a peace organization, there are some interesting things to note.

Assuming the similarities in political outlook, a staunch resistance to the occupation, a similar profile and a shared commitment to grassroots activism, it is interesting to identify a similarity in impact when comparing the activities of *Machsom Watch* and *Women in Black*. The activists themselves of *Machsom Watch* were empowered by their hands-on activism, finding a meaning beyond the day-to-day ordinary issues as well as great frustration with the situation on the ground. As one activist stated:

> *"I can't bear to see what goes on here. For the first time in many years I feel in good company. I am sick and tired of the inane gatherings, where people just sit and drink and shoot the breeze. Here I find people with meaning and message, and this gives me tremendous satisfaction. But on the other hand, there's also a sense of great helplessness."[145]*

Similar to the *Women in Black*, for the women of *Machsom Watch*, their close circles of family, friends and place of work were captive audiences for the message of peace and the importance of activism at the checkpoints. Unlike for the *Women in Black*, though, there is an issue of location which may play a role in the decision whether to join in or not:

> *"My daughters are very unhappy, they think I am quite right to go to the checkpoints but they want someone else's mother to go. But I say that only*

---

[145] Kadmon.

by doing this can we reclaim the humanistic revolution of Zionism. We are

calling on the world to help us reclaim our humanistic values."[146]

According to *Machsom Watch*'s spokeswoman, the impact of the women's activity on the

Palestinians and their perceptions of Israelis is positive across the board[147]. The women

are often the only un-armed, civilian figures at the checkpoint which are willing to take a

second look and solve an issue of humanitarian urgency, rather than give the outright

"no". Nonetheless, the women are also the only ones with which the Palestinians can talk

straight from the heart, and that includes venting about the situation and the conditions of

life under occupation:

"On the Palestinian side, the women of Machsom Watch are often the only

Israelis they ever see who are not in uniform, the only Israelis who exhibit

human kindness, and sometimes that is enough even though the women

often fail to succeed in persuading the soldiers to open a gate in the fence

to let children through to school. Other Palestinians vent their anger

against them because they are the only unarmed Israelis available. "I tell

them, you are at the wrong address," Hannah said. "But some tell us that

we are no different, we are part of the same game." When Ora told a

group of Palestinians she was a peace activist, one cried out that he

wanted war and not peace."[148]

---

[146] Linda Grant, "Checking on the Checkpoint," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2004.
[147] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005
[148] Grant.

From a conflict resolution perspective, the little interaction the women have with the Palestinians may bear the same characteristics, very broadly speaking as a people-to-people program. As much as Palestinian activists, both at the official and grassroots level have had many opportunities throughout the past decades to interact with other Israelis interested in dialogue and peace, for the most part, the average Palestinian in the occupied territories knows Israelis as soldiers, police, security service, or settlers. These groups, all carrying weapons, often uniformed, are the face of the occupation. The Palestinians rarely get to see something else unless they work in Israel, a practice that has been tremendously reduced during the *Al-Aksa Intifada* by the Israeli government. The women of *Machsom Watch* therefore represent a different kind of Israeli – a compassionate civilian, one that engages in dialogue with "the other", one who is minded of preserving human rights without justifying violations with a security excuse, one that cares to find out what is going on only a short ride from Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv. It is both a more human as well as a humanistic perspective of the Israeli. One activist pointed out the humanizing effect *Machsom Watch* has on a process that although dealing with human beings, has become anything but that:

> *"The presence of the Machsom Watch women has a humanizing effect on the Palestinians, even when we just stand there doing nothing. We inject a human perspective into processes that are automatic, arbitrary and absurd. Perhaps it is humiliating for the Palestinians that we see them in distress; still, our presence humanizes a terrible situation in which rules and regulations have taken over and quite often have nothing to do with*

security issues. The fact that we bear witness and that our presence may

have some effect is what really matters."[149]

The Jewish constituents in the case of *Machsom Watch* include the soldiers and police

forces at the checkpoint as well as the public at large. With the military, the women have

developed two levels of relationships – at the checkpoint and the beyond it with the

senior commanding level.

At checkpoints, the reaction towards the women is mixed, with some thinking they are in

the way while others acknowledge the stressful situation that can lead to extreme and

violent reactions particularly from the younger regular soldiers.

Nonetheless, the interaction with Israeli peace activists introduced the soldiers to civil

society, and political activism for peace. Additionally, although outside of their

traditional roles and from a place of protest against military policies, the women are not

pacifists and many with sons and daughters in the army, which may create a level of trust

between with the soldiers:

> *"The first time I went to Qalandia a soldier at the checkpoint called me a*
>
> *Palestinian whore," Hannah said. "I said, 'Listen, with my looks and my*
>
> *age do you think I still have a future in this profession?' Then I said, 'Do*
>
> *you talk to your grandmother like that?' The next time I saw him he*
>
> *apologized"….But other soldiers are susceptible to the fact that the*
>
> *women have themselves served in the Israeli army and have sons and*
>
> *daughters or grandchildren who are currently serving. "One soldier*
>
> *shouted at me, 'Is your son in the army?'" said Tamar. "I said to him, 'Yes*

[149] Kadmon.

he's a pilot.' He said, 'A pilot! What does he think of you?' I told him, 'He's

very proud.' Sometimes the soldiers say to me, 'Why are you doing this?' I

say, 'Because I am Jewish and my grandparents were in the

Holocaust.[150]'"

The women are therefore able to capitalize on their traditional perceived roles in Israeli

society to gain the soldier's trust and work with them. They shared once the same

uniform as soldiers themselves; they are mothers, grandmothers and sisters, of soldiers,

and they share the same historical narratives of religious persecution as the soldiers. In

these capacities, they are not outsiders anymore.

Beyond the checkpoint, the women of *Machsom Watch* interact with military

officials almost on a regular basis. As mentioned they come equipped with phone

numbers of contacts within the military and civil establishments which can be of

help in time of need. Nonetheless, they are aware that their presence on the

ground has an immediate impact on specific situations, yet they don't see the

responsiveness of the commanders to help them out at times, as a sign of

changing military policies, which is what they are really trying to change:

> *"We are their fig leaf," says Neta Efrony. "The army recognizes us,*
>
> *officers meet with us, they show empathy, they help. The commanders are*
>
> *especially nice to us."[151]*

According to Dagan, there is a lively internal debate within *Machsom Watch* whether to

continue the meetings and contacts with the military officials, considering that the impact

---

[150] Grant.
[151] Kadmon.

on military policies is fairly negligent. Those who support continuing the meeting see it as part of their protesting act, "so they won't say later that they didn't know".[152] The public at large is exposed to *Machsom Watch*'s activity through the reports they put up on their website, and the media coverage they get. The organization does not have current statistics on number of features in the media, but their activity was featured in the media in South Africa, Brazil, Australia, England and Germany, to name but a few. In Israel, the women of *Machsom Watch* have been featured in every one of the major national newspapers (Yediot Aharonot, Ma'ariv, Ha'aretz), the leading local newspapers and on national television as talk show guests[153]. At least one book has been published by one of *Machsom Watch*'s activists, and it has been written into a play currently running in Israel, and further introducing the organization and the importance of its activity to the Israeli public that is not familiar with the realities at the checkpoints.[154] It is again hard to say what the impact is on the public at large and whether the publicity has been conducive of a culture of peace or not, yet their growth, considering the time commitment and the area of activity, has been quite impressive (from less than 100 in April of 2002 to 500 in April 2005[155]). It should be noted that as opposed to *Women in Black*, the women of *Machsom Watch* are active in military controlled areas, where even those who are against them cannot express it freely[156], and therefore the bad publicity the *Women in Black* received from their encounters with the passersby does not play a role in this case.

---

[152] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005
[153] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005
[154] The book "Winter in Qalandia" by Lia Nirgad (Tel Aviv: Chargol Publishers, 2004) was transformed into a play depicting Nirgad's experience as a member of Machsom Watch during the winter of 2003 at the Qalandia checkpoint
[155] Interview with Adi Dagan, Spokeswoman for Machsom Watch, April 2005
[156] There are strict orders in the Israel Defense Forces against politicization

IV. CONCLUSION

Two main common threads run through the work of women peace activists, in Israel and elsewhere: First, they challenge their traditionally perceived roles within society. By protesting in the public sphere, women are leaving behind the home, the family, the community, and putting themselves and their political views to public scrutiny. Within the Israeli social context, women's role is still very much affiliated with that of the mother, birthing the nation's men who then need to fight for it. That same role, denies women the space to protest against government policies regarding war and peace and potentially put a dent in the national consensus, reflecting a possible weakness vis-à-vis the "enemy". Women peace activists in Israel therefore find it harder and harder to create the kind of civil mobilization and support for ending the occupation[157].

A second common thread is the unique, sometimes radical approach towards peace. Women have been identified as the voice to stipulate often radical ideas, that later, as time went by, were adopted by mainstream peace movements. In Israel, slogans such as "End the Occupation", "Palestine side by side with Israel – on the '67 border" and "Jerusalem – two capitals for two states", have been in the past and still do reflect women's propositions for a solution in the Middle East, while within Israeli society at large the issue of borders is still highly contested, and the division of Jerusalem is almost impossible to mention in many circles.

---

[157] The reference is particularly in the cases of Women in Black and Machsom Watch. Although some peace organizations have protested in the name of their "motherhood", thus embracing their traditional roles as Jewish-Israeli mothers, the focus of this research was on peace organizations who do not officially adopt that kind of narrative.

These two common threads lead to a general disdain of women peace activists in Israel. Their activities are still largely marginalized by mainstream politics and media, leading to a situation where social mobilization and change of mindset is virtually impossible. The proposed approach to overcome this challenge is to add a component that capitalizes on women roles, as they are traditionally perceived within society, to complement on-going activism.

The *Women in Black* model adopted a tactic of silent protesting, challenging almost every perceived role of the Jewish-Israeli woman – protesting in the public sphere, not generating a debate of dialogue, wearing black and thus supposedly undermining the notions of bereavement, and serving as a continuous reminder to death, war and pain. Although thousands of women joined the organization in its peak years, their activity was not acceptable and was publicly considered as betrayal.

Machsom Watch on the other hand, adopted, even if unintentionally, a model that incorporated women's traditional roles. Along side the human rights monitoring activity, the women have stepped into the role of mediators and problem-solvers between Palestinian civilians and Israeli security forces. Their success in helping out in particular situations is not necessarily the main issue, as much as the calming impact they have both as women and human rights monitors. For the soldiers, they are someone else's mother, grandmother or girlfriend, in addition to them being concerned citizens with legitimate demands to observe the execution of military policies. For the Palestinians, they are "the other Israelis" – unarmed, not uniformed and with a lot of empathy. Despite their protest activity, their clear disconnect from the natural setting of the Israeli mother birthing the nation's soldiers, the women of *Machsom Watch* are able to generate support and

empathy for their cause enough to make a difference on the ground. And therein, I

believe, lays the challenge and the potential of Israel women's peace actions.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Azar, Edward. *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict*. Hampshire, U.K.: Dartmouth, 1990.

Babbitt, Eileen F., and Tamara Pearson d'Estree. "Women and the art of peacemaking: Data from Israeli-Palestinian Interactive Problem-Solving Workshops." *Political Psychology* 19, no. 1, 185-209. Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

Bart, Denise. "Watch Out," *Zomet Hasharon*, June 6, 2004.

Chazan, Naomi. "Israeli Women and Peace Activism." In *Calling the Equality Bluff – Women in Israel*, eds. Barbara Swirski and Marilyn P. Safir, 152-161. New York: Pergamon Press, 1991.

Cockburn, Cynthia. *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*. London: Zed Books, 1998.

Emmet, Ayala. *Our sisters' Promised Land*. Anne Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996.

Freedman, Marcia. *Exile in the Promised Land: A Memoir*. New York: Fireband Books, 1990.

Gillath, Nurith. "Women Against War: Parents Against Silence." In *Calling the Equality Bluff – Women in Israel*, eds. Barbara Swirski and Marilyn P. Safir, 142-146. New York: Pergamon Press, 1991.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Grant, Linda. "Checking on the Checkpoint," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2004.

Harpaz, Yoram. "They Don't Shoot, They Don't Cry," *Kol Ha'ir*, March 10, 1989.

Helman, Sara, and Tamar Rapoport. "Women in Black: Challenging Israel's Gender and Socio-political Orders." *The British Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 4 (1997): 681-700.

Isachar, Hedva., ed. *Sisters in Peace: Feminist Voices of the Left*. Tel Aviv: Fetish, 2003.

Kadmon, Sima. "Many Mothers." *Yedioth Ahronoth*, November 21, 2003. Available from Machsom Watch Website
http://www.machsomwatch.org/media/simaKadmonEng.asp?link=media&lang=eng

Kriesberg, Louis. "The Growth of the Conflict Resolution Field." In *Turbulent Peace – The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Olser

Hampson and Pamela Aall, 407-426. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001.

Land, Randi Jo. "A Separate Peace?." *Jerusalem Post*, June 29, 1989.

Mazurana, Dyan E., and Susan R. McKay. *Essays on Human Rights and Democratic Development.* Montreal: International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 1999.

Pope, Juliet J. "The Emergence of a Joint Israeli-Palestinian Women's Peace Movement During the Intifadah." In *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation*, ed. Haleh Afshar, 172-184. London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1993.

Reardon, Betty A.*Women and Peace: Feminist Visions of Global Security.* New York: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking." *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 342-367

Sasson-Levy, Orna, and Tamar Rapoport. "Body, Gender, and Knowledge in Protest Movements: The Israeli Case." *Gender and Society* 17, no. 3 (2003): 379-403

Segev, Tom. "Women of the Checkpoints." *Ha'aretz*, August 10, 2002. Available from Machsom Watch Website http://www.machsomwatch.org/media

Sharoni, Simona. *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

Sharoni, Simona. "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel." *Middle East Report*, no. 207 (1998): 24-28

Svirsky, Gila. "The Impact of Women in Black in Israel." In *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War and Resistance*, eds. Marguerite R. Waller and Jennifer Rycenga, 235-245. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000.

Svirsky, Gila. "Feminist Peace Activism during the al-Aqsa Intifada." In *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontations: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocations*, eds. Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin, 233-247. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002.

Svirsky, Gila. "The Women's Peace Movement in Israel." In *Jewish Feminism in Israel – Some Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Kalpana Misra and Melanbie S. Rich, 113-131. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003.

Tessler, Mark, and Ina Warriner. "Gender, Feminism, and Attitudes Toward International Conflict: Exploring Relationships with Survey Data From the Middle East." *World Politics*, no. 49, vol. 2 (1997): 250-281

Tickner, J. Ann. *Gender in International Relations*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992.

UN Press Release SG/SM/7598. "Secretary General Calls for Council Action to Ensure Women are Involved in Peace and Security Decisions." October 24, 2000. Available from http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/20001024.sgsm7598.doc.html