

**Public Attitudes Concerning Women's
Representation in Local Government**

This report presents the findings of a survey on public attitudes concerning women's suitability for local government and the disposition to support women candidates for public office (i.e., mayors, heads of local council or local council members). The survey was conducted during the second week of April 1998, among a representative sample (512 interviewees) of Israel's Jewish population.

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Main Findings

A slowly rising but stable trend in the representation of women in local government can be discerned as of the 1960s. The current rate of women's representation is 10.9%. This trend is clearly visible among Jewish communities; in the Arab sector, the trend is only emerging, and therefore requires specially designed research.

Despite this trend, Israel remains low on the scale of women's representation in local government when compared to other western democracies, especially the Scandinavian countries.

The present survey revealed that more than 40% of the participants viewed discrimination to be the cause for the low rate of women's representation in government. Only 9% of the respondents were convinced that no Israeli women are suited to participate in the politic arena. Another 20% believed that women are incapable of solving Israel's problems. In addition, 18% of the sample were convinced that women are uninterested in politics because they, the respondents, thought that women still believed they belonged in the

home. These findings support a growing body of research indicating the Israeli public's increasing awareness of discrimination against women.

Furthermore, although both men and women claimed that discrimination is the primary factor inhibiting women's representation in government, the percentage of women upholding this position is greater than among men (48% versus 42%, respectively). In addition, this awareness of discrimination rises with the level of education.

The survey revealed that the degree of the respondent's religious commitment influences the perception of discrimination. The less religiously committed a population segment, the more its members pointed to discrimination as the variable explaining women's lack of representation. The most important gap, however, is found between the religiously ultra-orthodox and other segments of the survey population. This difference appears in the answers to all the survey questions, with the ultra-orthodox consistently expressing more extreme attitudes toward women and their roles in society.

With respect to women's suitability for political activity, the survey revealed that 24% of the sample agreed that women are better suited to local rather than to national government, despite 41% who indicated that such a statement was essentially incorrect. However, the last finding incorporates responses from two distinctive populations segments, each of which interprets the relevant question differently. The ultra-orthodox totally disagree that women are better suited to local government because they intensely object to the participation of women in politics under any circumstances, while the secular segment of the sample objects to this statement because they are convinced that women are suited for participation in government irrespective of the level.

In a related question, the participants in the survey were requested to evaluate who is more capable of handling selected issues, all of which were related to the community's governance. The four areas were social welfare, financial management, defence, and the community's cleanliness and appearance. Excluding the area of defence, more than half of the sample was convinced that men and women were equally competent to undertake each type of activity.

Those who did not view men and women as being equal tended to assign competence according to traditional lines: women were preferred for the area of social welfare and men for financial management. Defence was almost exclusively perceived as a masculine sphere.

The participants were also requested to indicate which general leadership qualities — or specific individual characteristics — they had observed as being important for their community's elected representatives. The interviewees indicated that general leadership qualities, such as responsive to community residents, were considered most pertinent for community leaders.

The findings indicate that women enjoy considerable esteem and that the same traits considered important for a mayor or city council member are attributed to them. The sole quality prominently lacking among women was a military background. On the other hand, the respondents consider military experience to be the least important among all the qualities relevant for public office.

A comparison of the assessments of women made by men with those made by women of themselves reveals a clear gender gap: women hold themselves in greater esteem than do men. This finding requires elaboration and more intensive research, but it undoubtedly implies that the contention that women do not support other women is the outcome of labelling, and is unsubstantiated by the survey findings. The gender gap is particularly conspicuous in the assessment of leadership capabilities. Women believe in the leadership potential of women more than men believe in that ability.

Assessments of women's suitability for political leadership roles was clearly linked to Israel's discriminatory social structure. Furthermore, about half the respondents in each of the categories comprising the sample, excluding the ultra-orthodox, considered the representation of women in government to be extremely important.

Finally, the members of each of the sample's segments were requested to indicate whether or not they wanted themselves represented as a group on their city councils. In terms of the strength of their determination to be represented, ultra-orthodox were the most adamant (more than 70% of the respondents in this category) among all the segments. They were followed by women — 51% of the women in the sample very much wanted to see women sit on the councils. We should note that although women were less resolute about representation than were the ultra-orthodox, in consideration of the fact that women comprise half the voting population and the ultra-orthodox only about 8%, their collective electoral voices have greater significance.

Women in Local Government in Selected Countries

Country	Percentage of Women	Year
Sweden	38.4	1991
Denmark	31.0	1989
Norway	31.0	1990
Britain	19.0	1985
Australia	18.4	1991
Uganda	15.0	1990
United States	14.0	1990
Israel	10.9	1993
Poland	10.2	1990
Greece	8.2	1990
Mexico	4.5	1989
Japan	2.3	1990

Sources: Bystydzienski 1992:205; Sawyer and Simms 1993:149; data from the embassies of Britain, Sweden and Denmark.