

Introduction: Women and work from feminist perspectives

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From Mary Wollstonecraft (1792/1978) to Virginia Woolf (1929/1974; 1938/1977) and Betty Friedan (1963) through bell hooks (2000) and Sylvia Walby (Walby, 1990), feminist theoreticians have repeatedly identified the role and importance of women's work as a major element in understanding sexist social orders and in promoting social equality for women. This point of view is usually linked to the importance of work as the source of ownership over economic resources, such as food, property and capital. Other aspects of work have also been identified as crucial to women's liberation: a sense of self-worth; a sense of purpose and accomplishment; the ability to contribute to society as a whole; experience with and control over social orders outside the home; and a sense of self-sufficiency. Hence, feminist theories have underlined the close connection between what work means for women within the culture and their economic status in the culture (Stewart, 1990).

Intellectual analyses and research studies deriving from the various streams of feminism – liberal, radical, Marxist, socialist, and post-colonist – have analysed the meaning of women's work in the context of reproducing the existing social and gender order, and of perpetuating male dominance (for a comprehensive discussion, see Ferguson & Hennessy, 2010).

Women's work has also attracted major attention among Israeli gender researchers. Researchers from various disciplines using diverse research methods have examined the extent and nature of women's participation in the labor market as an expression of equality and inequality in Israeli society and culture (e.g., Izraeli, 1991, 1999; Benjamin & Sambol, 2007; Bernstein, 1983). Similarly, the popular myth of equality in Israel's pioneer society was, among other factors, based upon the prevalent notion that the work of pioneer women was equal to that of pioneer men; shattering this myth was also based upon exposing inequalities with respect to work.

Even though more and more women worldwide have entered the labour market and despite increasing research interest in women's work, research studies both in Israel and the rest of the world for the most part focus on examining the life patterns of working women and the subtle and not so subtle institutional and social barriers to women's occupational opportunities. They do not, however, pay enough attention to the phenomenological nature of the work experience for women. How do working women see themselves? How do they experience their work? What meanings do they attribute to their work in the context of the rest of their lives (Chester & Grossam, 1990)?

Israeli research on the issue of work and how it relates to diverse aspects of women's lives is still in its infancy. The few studies that have examined this issue include Sambol & Benjamin, 2007; Frenkel, 2008; Motzafi-Haller, 2012; Bernstein, Benjamin & Motzafi-Haller, 2011.

The current collection seeks to contribute to this developing body of knowledge. It focuses on the significance of work in the personal lives of diverse groups of women in Israeli society, based on the assumption that the phenomenological perspective is a good jumping-off point for understanding the complex meanings of work in the lives of women. The discussion raised in this collection seeks to observe women's work from the perspective of intersecting identities or integrative feminism. This perspective assigns equal weight to different categories of identity, among them gender, ethnicity, class, nationalism and sexuality. In this way, the collection seeks to examine the interpretations given by various Israeli women to the notion of work and to their own work experience. The epistemic approach that positions personal experience at the centre has led the researchers to adopt diverse qualitative methods, such as ethnography (Dr. Inbal Cicurel), in-depth interviews (Dr. Sigal Nagar-Ron and Dr. Tal Dekel) and focus groups (Dr. Sigal Oppenheim-Shachar).

Even though the articles in this collection focus on different groups of women and reveal varying points of view regarding the concept of work, the collection as a whole demonstrates the blurring boundaries between work and others aspects of women lives. Hence, the work experience should be examined with regard to additional personal identities and social positions.

The research group

This collection was initiated by the Feminist Forum at Sapir College, and is supported by the college. The Feminist Forum was founded in 2008 with the goal of promoting academic and social enterprises that strive to achieve gender and sexual justice through three forms of action: academic research, social-feminist action on campus and social-feminist action in the south of Israel. In establishing the forum, we were inspired by our

participation in a research group that examined feminist methodology (Krumer-Nevo, Lavie-Ajayi & Hacker, 2014). For us, participation in this group was a significant intellectual and social feminist experience. The experience led to our decision to form a research group as part of the Sapir Feminist Forum that would examine women and work from feminist perspectives and would facilitate participatory study.

At the end of 2011, we issued a call for proposals, asking respondents to send us a description of the research projects they were interested in promoting as part of the group. The call emphasised our desire to extend the concept of work to include work that is unpaid and to examine this concept outside the context of the working world. Despite this, the responses we received focused on the notion of work in its traditional context, as is reflected in the articles in the collection. The group is comprised of researchers from diverse research fields: sociology, anthropology, social work, psychology, gender studies, communications and Middle Eastern studies. While this diversity of disciplines proved challenging in generating a common theoretical and methodological language, at the same time it was also inspiring.

Most of those who participated in the research workshop were young researchers working in academia and still writing their doctoral dissertations. Only a few of the applicants were veteran researchers. Moreover, most of the participants worked in academia as junior staff members or adjunct lecturers, with future employment in academia uncertain. Hence, this participant work structure created a sense of solidarity and acknowledged the role of peripherality in the researchers' relations with themselves and with the objects of their research – for the most part women positioned at the margins.

The position of these researchers in academia along with their limited experience in academic writing had an impact on how the collection of articles was consolidated. To our regret, some of the writers did not manage to find the time to move their planned research projects forward, while other research studies were not sufficiently mature for publication. Nonetheless, even those who were not able to finish writing an article reported that they had gained something valuable from the group learning process. The results of the workshop find expression in the research studies published in this edition. They also emerge in a number of special projects that express “voices from the field” — feminist endeavours carried out by women to help working women support themselves with dignity. The first such voice from the field is the report on Project SAWA, a project led by Dr. Nuzha Allasad Alhuzail, one of the members of the research group. The report was written by Dr. Smadar Noy, whose research within the group focused on the world of activist women who are academic faculty members. Another “voice from the field,” the project for fair trade shops run by the *Achoti* (“Sister”) organisation, was written by doctoral student Reut Reina Bendrihem, another member of the research group.

The research group's activities continued over two years. The first four sessions were devoted to the joint examination of major issues in the field of women and work. Each session was led by a senior researcher with experience in the area of gender and work, who expressed solidarity with the project and who contributed from her knowledge, experience and time for the sake of this emerging group. Reading materials relevant to the topic under discussion were also assigned for each session. The first session, led by Prof. Sylvia Fogiel-Bijaoui, centred on a sociological analysis of research in the field of women's work in Israel. The focus of the second session, led by Prof. Orly Benjamin, was on the intersection between gender, class and ethnicity in the Israeli labour market. Under the leadership of Prof. Michal Krumer-Nevo, the third session discussed the relationship between qualitative methods and the research field. In the fourth session, Prof. Deborah Bernstein discussed historiographic issues in research concerned with women's work in Israel and the rest of the world.

Group sessions were also devoted to discussing and offering feedback on the emerging articles. The entire fifth session was set aside for providing group feedback on the drafts of completed articles. This group feedback helped some of the participants complete their research projects. At this point, each article was sent to two or three expert reviewers for blind review.

The articles

The collection opens with Inbal Cicurel's article, titled "We did not come here to rest: Multiple-work among women in a national-religious community village." The article focuses attention on the limitations in the traditional definition of the concept of work. Based upon ethnographic research among groups of young women belonging to the national religious stream of Judaism and who, together with their families, founded new settlements, Cicurel demonstrates how these women work incessantly, whether for pay or not, during all their waking hours. She goes on to show that the women are under constant pressure to excel in a variety of areas including the religious sphere, the secular-economic sphere (by developing a career) and the area of volunteerism (by settling the Land of Israel). According to Cicurel, the work pressure on these women derives from the blurring of the boundaries between holy and secular work under the challenging circumstances of establishing a new settlement.

Sigal Nagar-Ron's article, "Rethinking employment opportunities on the periphery: Employment opportunities of Mizrahi women in low status positions in a southern Israeli development town," shifts the spotlight from those considered the ideal pioneer women in Israeli society to those seen as the "others"—second-generation

Mizrahi women living in development towns. Through a thematic analysis of the life stories of these women, Nagar-Ron shows that despite being aware of their economic exploitation, they demonstrate initiative, creativity and autonomy in their work. The article's main claim is that these women, marginalised in so many ways, are empowered by these work experiences even though they know they cannot translate their empowerment at work to better employment arrangements or to economic mobility.

Another marginalised group of women whose voices are sounded in the collection are young women from stigmatised communities. In an article titled "Sense of Self-worth and "Extra feminist assistance" advancing and strengthening occupational aspirations among girls from stigmatized communities," Sigal Oppenheim-Shachar analyses response strategies among young women who participated in the Reshatot ("Networks") workshop. The workshop was geared at developing occupational ambitions among these women that would lead to economic independence. Oppenheim-Shachar analyses the dialogue between these women and the workshop contents, and points to the conditions that are needed to make the workshop more helpful to the women.

Tal Dekel's article, "At(art)work value: gendered aspects of income and livelihood, the case of women artists in Israel," sheds light on a unique work situation. The article, which is based on in-depth interviews with women artists who seek to support themselves by their artistic work, reveals the series of barriers that these women must face. The barriers derive from the intersecting identities defining the women artists: gender, ethnicity, nationality and class. Dekel concludes the article by proposing directions for future research and a reconsideration of the institutionalised support mechanisms for women artists.

The final article in the collection is the article by Einat Lachover titled "'Why women still can't have it all?': Israeli media discourse on motherhood vs. career." The article examines patterns in the Israeli media discourse regarding attitudes toward women and work and the gendered messages built into this discourse. The analysis reveals conservative trends in the media discourse, among them the exclusion of men as well as the framing of this issue as a problem of individual women. It also reveals a complex description of the role of mothers, including challenging voices that call for denial of the romanticisation of motherhood and the idealisation of "intensive mothering", and that suggest focusing on the needs of the mother rather than those of the child.

This series of articles concludes with an essay by Prof. Pnina Motzafi-Haller. The essay is based on an ethnographic study Motzafi-Haller carried out in the development town of Yeroham in the Negev (Motzafi-Haller, 2012). In the study,

she examines the ways in which Mizrahi women living in peripheral regions in Israel experience the world of work within a broader array of very specific social and political relations. Based upon the phenomenological experience of women living on the margins of society, Motzafi-Haller seeks to challenge universal categories such as “work,” “family” and “motherhood” and to generate “alternative knowledge.”

The collection also includes two reports on “voices from the field” describing socioeconomic projects aiming at the economic and personal empowerment of women on the geographic and social margins of Israel who must cope with poverty and existential difficulties. The first of these reports is by Dr. Smadar Noy, and describes Project SAWA, a project designed to promote and support business initiatives among Bedouin women living in the Negev. The report is based on Noy’s interview with Dr. Nuzha Allasad Alhuzail, leader of the project. The report outlines the complex contexts within which the program takes place, and the returns it has generated in the lives and surroundings of these women. The second report by Reut Reina Bendrihem describes the fair trade project run by the *Achoti* (“Sister”) organisation. The project was based upon the vision of the international Fair Trade movement, and involved setting up a shop for the direct and non-brokered sale of products made by women who have been excluded from the economy for reasons of gender, ethnicity, nationality or class. The project also provides these women with individual support toward improving the visibility, branding and accessibility of their products. In the metaphoric words of Shula Keshet, CEO of *Achoti*, the goal of the project is not only to provide these women with the fish (livelihood) and the fishing rods (the means of supporting themselves) but also to supply them with the lakes, that is, to bring them into direct contact with the consumers. Not only do these two projects seek to bring about change among the women who are directly involved, they also strive to generate a fundamental feminist change in society and to construct a more equal and just society.

We want to take this opportunity to thank all the members of the participatory learning research group, as well as the anonymous reviewers who demonstrated their solidarity and professionalism through their willingness to respond to the articles, often within a very short period of time. Finally we extend our thanks to the management of Sapir College for their financial support of the research group’s activities.

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