

“Why women still can’t have it all?” Israeli media discourse on motherhood vs. career

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the Israeli media coverage of two American cases that aroused lively discourse in the Israeli media: Anne-Marie Slaughter, who left the United States Department of State in order to spend more time with her two adolescent sons, and Marissa Mayer, who as President and CEO of Yahoo gave up her maternity leave. The paper uses interpretive discourse analysis to examine all the items in the Israeli media that discussed these two incidents. The ideological discourse concerning motherhood vs. work revealed conservative trends toward the exclusion of men, and framed the issue as the problem of individual women and not as a political and social problem. Nevertheless, the research also revealed a complex representation of the mothering role. This included voices challenging the romanticisation of motherhood and the ideology of intensive mothering, proposing that the focus should be on the needs of the mother rather than those of the children. A possible explanation for this complex discourse lies in the Israeli cultural context, which encourages the dual ideal of a high birthrate and a productive working life.

Introduction

The July-August 2012 issue of American magazine *The Atlantic* published a 12,000 word article with the provocative title: “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.” The writer of the article, Anne-Marie Slaughter, served as Director of Policy Planning with the United States Department of State between 2009-2011. She left this position after two years and returned to her previous job as a university professor, stating she wanted to spend more time with her two adolescent sons, who had been adversely affected by her position. Slaughter’s article aroused a lively media discourse that continued for

several weeks and extended beyond the borders of the US to other countries, among them Israel.¹

In July 2012, not long after the Slaughter article was published, US news media outlets announced the appointment of Marissa Mayer as President and CEO of Yahoo. Journalists focused on the fact that Mayer, pregnant and only weeks away from giving birth to her first son, declared that she would only take a few days of maternity leave. After she gave birth, the matter again became the focus of media attention and received a great deal of attention worldwide, including in Israel.

These two cases seem to represent opposing narratives. The Slaughter case appears to symbolise the narrative of “returning home” – an educated professional woman resigns from her post in favour of motherhood. The Mayer affair, in contrast, seems to symbolise the typical liberal narrative of an educated professional woman who renounces motherhood in favour of success in the male arena. Yet it is not surprising that the media discourse in Israel often connected these two incidents. Indeed, these two cases serve as the basis for this case study, examining how Israeli media constructs the relationship between motherhood and career. The research questions are as follows: What are the patterns marking the discourse on the relationship between motherhood and work, and what gender messages are reflected and constructed in the Slaughter and Mayer cases?

Over the years, research in sociology, work studies and law have frequently documented inequality and gender discrimination in the employment market worldwide and in Israel, and in particular on the following topics: the gender salary gap, gender segregation in the labour market and labour laws pertaining to work and salary issues (e.g., in the global context, see Blau, Brinton & Grusky, 2006; Hochschild, 1989/2003; in the Israeli context, see Hacker & Frankel, 2005; Stier, 2006). Yet, no study has examined the cultural discourse about working mothers in the media.

As primary cultural products, the media not only reflects society and culture, but also reproduces and constructs values, outlooks, perceptions and definitions of the “self” and the “other” (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). This theoretical approach, known in media theory as the social construction of reality, assumes that there is no single reality and therefore reality is discursively constructed (McQuail, 2005). The current article examines how the issue of motherhood vs. career is constructed in Israeli media.

This issue is particularly relevant and interesting in the Israeli context due to the importance Israeli-Jewish society ascribes to forming a family, and to the centrality of the role of mother in the Israeli civilian discourse (Berkovitch, 2001). Furthermore, a high percentage of Israeli women work outside the home: 67.4%, as of 2009 (Fichtelberg-Barmatz & Harris, 2011).

The theoretical part of this article includes a survey of the media discourse on the

relationship between motherhood and career, and specifically the discourse concerning mothers who leave the work force. Given the lack of Israeli research on this topic and the venue of the two incidents that are the focus of this study, the survey is based mainly on the literature from the United States. I then review the Israeli cultural context for the motherhood vs. career issue, and use interpretive discourse analysis to examine all the items in the Israeli media that discussed these two incidents. Finally, I discuss the broader feminist issue reverberating through this media discourse: Has feminism succeeded?

The media discourse concerning motherhood vs. career

The discussion about women working outside the home is related to an ethos that distinguishes between the private sphere identified with femininity, and the public sphere identified with masculinity. Sociologist Hays (1996) believes that the ideology of “intensive mothering” that emerged at the end of the twentieth century is a new version of the division between these two spheres. According to this ideology, mothering requires the devotion of a great deal of time, energy and money to raising children. Hence, time spent at work is at the expense of mothering time, and a working mother withholds “parenting” from her children. Hays’s analysis includes a gendered analysis: Intensive mothering facilitates the exclusion of married women from the salaried work force, and certainly from positions of authority and prestige.

Media research claims that the intensive mothering ideology is both reflected and constructed by the media (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). As early as the 1950s, feminist media criticism pointed to the beginnings of the contradictory discourse on women’s work (Douglas, 1994; Faludi, 1991). The World War II economy had enabled millions of women to enter the labour market, but as soon as the war ended a cultural attack was launched to coerce women to withdraw from the work force (Faludi, 1991).

In the 1970s and 1980s, as more and more women entered the work force, news media began paying increasing attention to working women (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). According to Faludi (1991), the establishment’s offensive against women’s rights – one that began in the early 1980s – was a cultural reaction to the feminist threat in general. That said, the emphasis on working women stemmed from the massive entry of women into the employment market. Similarly, Douglas & Michaels (2004) claim that cultural changes influenced by the feminist movement served as the background for the new momism, a reactionary ideology that idealised motherhood as the most rewarding job of all.

Douglas and Michaels also argue that the media were central to creating this ideology because journalists romanticised motherhood, while disregarding the emotional and physical work involved in this role. The media frequently feature a narrative known

as the “mommy wars”, which considers the question of who is better: the stay-at-home mom or the working mother (Zimmerman, Aberle, Krafchick, & Harvey, 2008). This binary narrative represents the stay-at-home mom as lacking in self-efficacy, although the working mother is also not given much credit for her function as a mother (Johnston & Swanson, 2003).

The new momism is a central component of the complex message put forward by post-feminist discourse: A woman can work outside the home and even do jobs that were once the sole territory of men, so long as she maintains a conventional feminine appearance (i.e., micro-mini skirts) that allow her to remain attractive to men (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Moreover, post-feminist discourse does not challenge the patriarchal order, according to which working women still bear the brunt of the burden of taking care of the home and the children. Instead, it encourages women to do everything, that is, to be “supermoms” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; McRobbie, 2009).

In a content analysis of media texts concerned with working mothers, Descartes & Kottak (2009) found that these mothers were shown as taking the major responsibility for parenting and as having difficulty combining the role of a parent with the role of a paid employee. Further, the children of these working mothers were considered at risk due to a lack of maternal attention, with their mothers’ decision to go to work shown as egoistical.

The media discourse concerning the Opt-Out Revolution

Beginning in the 1980s and the early 1990s, a new trend became apparent in the American media. This trend, termed the “mommy track” by Douglas and Michaels (2004), was marked by an ongoing flow of stories about mothers who had chosen to leave high-status positions and prestigious professions in favour of raising their children (Faludi, 1991; Williams, 2010). In the wake of an article by journalist Lisa Belkin, published in *The New York Times* in 2003,² this trend became known as the Opt-Out Revolution (Rivers, 2007; Williams, 2010).³

American sociologists such as Williams, Manvell and Bornstein (2006) and Kuperberg and Stone (2008) have demonstrated the gap between the positive press given to these stories about leaving the work force and the actual social reality. The media narrative focuses on women in administrative jobs, even though they only constitute a small minority of working women. Similarly, the media shows family life as the primary motivation for leaving the work force, even though most women leave due to the employment market factors that have forced them out. Finally, media stories disregard the symptoms that frequently accompany leaving the job market, such as depression, loneliness and loss of status. These sociologists therefore stress that the decision of working women to leave the job market do not reflect a return

to traditional family values. For example, one study analysed a series of stories published in the early 21st century, in which women who left the workplace relate their experiences. The study found these stories to be marked by post-feminist and neo-liberal discourse and language and the rhetoric of individual choice, while they did not discuss the structural issues of women’s work (Vavrus, 2007). At the same time, discourse in the American media shuns stories about working women who are not well off and who are struggling to survive in the employment market. The media discourse also ignores any discussion of the changes that need to be made in workplaces and in public policy to accommodate the needs of working women, and disregards the family dynamics that lead women to opt out of work and force men into the role of breadwinner (Williams, 2010).

The Israeli cultural context for the issue of motherhood and work

Israeli society is pro-natalism. Amongst developed nations, Israel has the highest birthrate. (Frenkel, 2011). Nevertheless, in contrast to the American public discourse – which for years promoted the ideal of domesticity and the ideal of motherhood and highly valued full-time housewives – the public discourse in Israel has always promoted a “dual ideal” for women: a high birthrate and a productive working life. The historical, political and demographic attributes of the early State of Israel determined that work and motherhood constituted the desired norm. Israeli women are expected to participate in the task of building the homeland by giving birth and raising children, and at the same time by holding down a productive job for pay (Fogiel-Bijoui, 1999; Berkovitch, 2001). Evidence for this can be found in the fact that the employment rate for mothers in Israel is one of the highest in the world (Frenkel, 2011). In 2010, 65.3% of the mothers of children under the age of 14 worked outside the home (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Along with the increasing Americanisation of Israeli society in recent years (First & Abraham, 2009), the ideology of intensive mothering has begun to pervade the local discourse (Davidov, 2010). Nevertheless, this ideology is still marginal, advocated by a limited social echelon and subject to social criticism.

The idea of women working outside the home was already accepted in the Yishuv (pre-state) period, as was the assignment of childcare to women other than the mothers of the children. The social policy that evolved during the 1950s and 1960s was intended to protect working women in their role as mothers. Yet along with the development of this tradition of concern about the relationship between work and family, over the years a system clearly delineated by gender also developed in Israel. This system was based on the ideal of the man as the primary breadwinner and the woman as responsible for the home and the children. In the 1970s and 1980s, the

female civilian workforce grew in size, yet women remained in the “working mother” track, working mainly in the government or public sector. Women often chose to work in part-time positions and rejected promotions to management posts, thus preserving the gendered structure of work/family. In the 1990s, as neo-liberal ideology began to spread in Israeli society, Israeli women strengthened their ties to the job market, for example by working longer hours. Yet the gendered division of labor did not change fundamentally (Izraeli, 2001).

This being the case, Israeli women – including middle-class professional women – are not expected to choose between absolute dedication to work and absolute dedication to family, but rather to combine both work and family (Frenkel, 2008; Liebllich, 1987). Moreover, Israeli women still are subject to what sociologist Joan Williams has dubbed the “domesticity regime” (Williams, 2010): the gendered distinction that defines the private sphere as the responsibility of women and the public sphere as the responsibility of men. Despite the fact that between 1989 and 2005, the gap narrowed between men and women in Israel with respect to the centrality of work outside of the home (Oren, 2009), Israeli women still bear responsibility for most of the housework and childcare. A significant portion of the Israeli public (40%) believe that when a mother works, the family is adversely affected (Glikman, Oren & Lewin-Epstein, 2003).

This current study assumes that the media plays a major role in constructing how people perceives the relationship between motherhood and work.

Following the intense attention given by the Israeli media to the Slaughter and Mayer cases, and with no local examples of “opt-out” narratives, the current study analyses how the relationship between motherhood and work is reflecting and constructing gender perceptions in these two case studies.

The research questions are as follows: What are the discourse patterns on the topic of motherhood vs. work in Israel, and what are the ideological gendered messages inherent in this discourse as reflected in these case studies?

The research: corpus and analytical tools

The research corpus of this article includes all the items published on news sites in the Israeli media that mentioned either the Slaughter or Mayer cases – or both – over the course of four months, from the end of June to the end of October 2012. Included are items that appeared in the traditional media (print journalism, television and radio) and in the online media, including blogs written on news websites. A total of 35 items were identified, of which approximately two-thirds discussed the Slaughter incident, and the remaining third referring to the Mayer incident (sometimes in reference to Slaughter).

With both incidents, the media discourse appeared mainly in the press (print and

online), and to a lesser extent in radio and television. The Israeli daily newspaper *Ha’aretz* devoted a great deal of attention to these two incidents (eight items, constituting 23% of the research corpus). This is most likely due to this newspaper’s appeal to those in the higher socioeconomic echelons (Caspi & Limor, 1999), and is in line with the characteristics of the two women at the centre of these incidents. Only two items were found in the broadcast media.⁴

The texts were analysed using critical methodology based on the philosophy of the Frankfurt school, which assumes that knowledge is not objective but rather created according to needs and interests. This research approach focuses on the dynamics of the social and cultural forces that produce hegemonic knowledge and ideology (Shkedi, 2011; Van Dijk, 1990). Critical discourse analysis focuses on examining the structures and sequences of arguments and narratives, and the cultural meanings reflected and constructed by them (Klein, 2010). The patterns and topics in the texts were examined based on the view that ideology is discursive and therefore sometimes pragmatic and contradictory (Gill, 2007). The method of analysis concentrated on examining the hidden messages in the text, that is, on revealing its narratives and myths as well as what was not said in the text, on both the textual and the intertextual levels. The textual level involved analysing the linguistic-rhetorical elements. The intertextual level included comparing the text to other predominant texts, myths or ideologies. Whilst the research took a multicultural perspective, the current study placed emphasis on finding gendered dimensions. In this context, an attempt was made to locate contradictory and unique voices that digressed from or challenged the voice of the mainstream.

Discourse patterns

Most of the participants were not precise about the facts of these two incidents. For example, some writers discussed how Slaughter left her job in order to stay at home, even though she did not leave the job market but rather changed her career path – in effect returning to a senior position in academia. Moreover, the writers ignored the fact that the length of Mayer’s maternity leave said nothing about her commitment to motherhood or her job. It was clear to all that her declaration that she would return to work immediately was intended to mollify anxious Yahoo investors.

The Israeli media discourse for the Slaughter and Mayer incidents was marked by a lack of critical attitude with respect to either the American or the Israeli discourse. Only one of the people who participated in the Israeli discourse, Dr. Yael Itzhaki, CEO of Netta (Center for Career Development), critically discussed the incidents in terms of the prevailing social and employment reality. “The attempt to take anything whatsoever from the senior, demanding and rare position she [Slaughter] held in the

American government and project it onto the lives of other women worldwide in tantamount to throwing sand in women's eyes" (Itzhaki, *The Marker*, August 21, 2012). Further, Itzhaki directly criticised the means of representation used in the media discourse. She pointed to the gap between the provocative title of Slaughter's article, which seems to taunt feminism, and the complex feminist position Slaughter puts forward in the body of the article:

"From time to time a career woman who has climbed the ladder of success comes out and declares that we have been deceived and that it is impossible to combine career and family. The title screams out while the text says something entirely different It would have been better if the magazine had chosen a title that more accurately and moderately reflected the spirit of the article, even if as a result it had sold fewer copies." (Itzhaki, August 21, 2012).

In addition to this lack of critical attitude, the Israeli discourse concerning the Slaughter and Mayer incidents is marked by three interrelated discourse patterns: globalism, individualism and lack of dialogism. Each of these patterns is detailed below.

The discussion of the Slaughter and Mayer cases adopted a global or universalised perspective, almost completely ignoring the specifics of the Israeli context. This discourse examined the issue of motherhood and work as if it were a homogeneous phenomenon, without referring to the particular attributes of the Israeli employment market, typical Israeli cultural perceptions, the prevailing employment conditions or the social services provided in Israel. For example, in Israel a 14-week maternity leave period is mandatory, and women employees are not allowed to return to work before the end of the first six weeks of this leave, as this is considered a period of recuperation. In contrast, in the United States women are not automatically entitled to paid maternity leave and there is no government involvement. The Federal law that permits new mothers to be absent from their jobs for up to 12 weeks without pay applies only to workplaces with more than 50 employees (Lotan, 2006). Israeli writers usually reproduced the American discourse, ignoring the Israeli context.

The Israeli discourse only made rare mention of the local context. For example, Dana Spector's column emphasised the gap between the norm of encouraging birth typical in Israeli society and the organisational culture at Israeli workplaces, which does not enable women to make time for family:

"Is Israel hooked on giving birth and crazy about family values? On the one hand, we are encouraged to have as many children as possible. People pat our empty bellies at meals and moan, "Nu, what about another one?" On the other hand, as soon as we become mothers, we are forced to conceal the fruit of our

wombs from our boss in some imaginary attic" (Spector, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, 7 *Yamim*, July 5, 2012).

However, Spector's comment is made casually and she does not explore this point further. Two additional local references do hint at a comparison between Israeli and American law with respect to maternity leave, but even in this context no fundamental discussion takes place.

Another characteristic of the Israeli discourse concerning the Slaughter and Mayer cases is individualism: the writer's expression of personal experiences, which usually hint at a broader message. This individualistic discourse took a number of forms: a journalistic collage (based on an interview with three mothers) as well as opinion columns written by women journalists or by occasional journalists or bloggers. An individualistic discourse pattern reflects the blurring of boundaries between the private and public spheres, as discussed by media discourse researchers. These researchers have observed the trend toward breaking through the boundaries of the traditional opinion marketplace, where experts and commentators make claims. Alongside and sometimes in place of this traditional marketplace, a sensitive public space has emerged in which private individuals tell their stories (Lunt & Stenner, 2005). The Israeli discourse concerning Slaughter and Mayer rarely gave voice to experts and commentators. It demonstrated the notable presence of "ordinary" people in the public discourse; it also demonstrated the positive value now attributed to testimony, to personal stories and to the emotions, as sources for establishing claims in the public debate as well as legitimising participation in this debate (Hamo, Blondheim, & Liebes, 2012). Not one of the items in the corpus gave an up-to-date structural analysis of the status of mothers in the employment market based on data and official studies, whether in the global or in the Israeli context. This finding confirms Vavrus's (2007) criticism of US media and its failure to discuss the structural issues related to working mothers.

Professional writers associated with the political or academic establishment also expressed this individualism. For example, an opinion column by Tzipi Livni – former government minister and Deputy Prime Minister – appeared in *Lady Globes*, a financial newspaper for women. The timing of this column was not coincidental. At the time of publication, Livni was contemplating the steps to take with respect to declaring her candidacy for the Knesset (Israeli parliament) as the head of a new political party, and this column focusing on what was considered a women's issue was apparently an attempt to appeal women in the voting public.⁵

The headline for Livni's column described it as "something personal" and indeed most of it was just that. At the beginning Livni compared herself to Slaughter: "Anne-Marie Slaughter, a successful woman of my age..." She went on to focus

on her experience of personal conflict throughout her career: “My pangs of conscience were the hardest thing for me. Even today, when my two sons are all grown, I still remember the feeling in my heart that was always with me when they were little.” Although Livni also sought to convey a broader message to her readers, she did so mainly through the personal dimension: “I hope my sons will tell their wives and daughters that both [family and work] are possible.” Livni also referred to the fundamental principle underlying the issue:

“The unfortunate part is that the prevailing statement with respect to salary is in fact true. Women are paid less than men for the same job, and as of today childcare expenses are still not tax deductible – this is a change that the government should be charged with” (Livni, *Lady Globes*, Vol. 167, August 2012).

Nevertheless – and despite Livni’s public responsibility to promote legislation and policy with respect to working women in Israel – her column included no call for changing the public agenda and certainly not for public action. Livni offered her opinion based on her own personal experiences as a career woman who also happened to be the mother of two sons.

Another politician, Gila Gamliel, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office responsible for the Advancement of Young People, Students and Women, was interviewed for an article. This article, like Livni’s, did not provide any structural analysis of the issue (Amitai-Cohen, *Mako*, July 7, 2012) and was based mainly on the individual experiences of working mothers in the business sector. Gamliel, who gave birth to her two daughters whilst a member of the eighteenth Knesset, began by discussing her personal experience and went on to report on her legislative activities in this area. By way of contrast, in an opinion column Dr. Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Director of Gender Studies at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev, consciously and explicitly combined the personal with the political: “Even if it seems that this [leaving work] is a personal decision, such a decision is tied to a political problem The institutions of society refuse to change” (Dahan-Kalev, *Ha’aretz*, August 27, 2012). She went on – in a manner uncharacteristic of the accepted discourse in the academic social environment – to reveal her own personal story:

“Over the last several years I have dedicated myself to establishing and running the program for gender studies at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. This dedication involved making unequivocal concessions in my family life. As a single mother of a son who was in elementary school at the time, I moved to Beer Sheba because it was clear that my career would not be as forgiving as my son .

. . . Looking back, staying at the office until late at night was not as effective as I thought, despite the concessions I made to my family and social life" (Dahan-Kalev, *Ha'aretz*, August 27, 2012).

While Dahan-Kalev analysed cultural and social perceptions of working mothers, she did not base her argument on research findings or numerical data.

Slaughter's personal article apparently yielded a very personal discourse in Israel. The discourse on Mayer, however, was less personal. Nevertheless, the discourse in both cases mainly expressed the random positions of specific speakers rather than a systematic and structured analysis of the issue.

Finally, the Israeli media discourse on these two cases was marked by a lack of dialogue among the various writers. None responded to what the others had to say, but rather only to Slaughter's article or to news reports about Mayer. The only dialogue between speakers took place in the two items in the electronic media, in the form of a radio and a television interview.

Given the above, the Israeli discourse on Slaughter and Mayer reflects and reproduces the prevailing view in the American press that the issue of career vs. family is an individual problem, a psychological challenge or a matter of personal choice (Blair-Loy, 2003).

The exclusion of fathers

The Israeli discourse on the Slaughter and Mayer cases reflects the centrality of the maternal role and excludes the father's parental role. All the voices in the discourse (with the exception of two), whether career journalists or incidental participants, were female. The exclusion of fathers, and of men in general, from the discourse reflects and preserves the existing gender order. As an American research study found (Descartes & Kottak 2009), the Israeli discourse portrays mothers as bearing the major burden of the parental role. Thus the parenting vs. work conflict is also shown as the problem of women and not as a broad social and political problem. Such a representation reflects in part the social reality in Israel as documented in public opinion studies. A majority of the Israeli public believes that the role of women in parenting is more central than that of men (Glikman, Oren & Lewin-Epstein, 2003). Likewise, the division of labour with respect to childcare in Israel has remained traditional (Stier, 2010).

One unusual item in this regard is the column by the *Ha'aretz* newspaper's columnist for women's affairs. Although she claims that the solution to the motherhood vs. career conflict is complex and requires change in the public, employment, educational and private arenas, the opening lines of her column stress the change required in the personal arena with respect to the role of fathers:

“Here is a large, indeed enormous, mystery that the best minds have yet to unravel. True, many men work at jobs that are so important there is no possibility and no chance for them to leave, say twice a week, at 4:00 pm to pick up their children from preschool. True . . . so how is it that . . . these men, if they happen to get divorced, all of a sudden do manage to leave their important places of work twice a week at 4:00 pm to pick up their children from preschool?” (Saar, *Ha'aretz*, July 2, 2012).

Multiple voices and contradictions

According to Anglo-American research studies, the media emphasise the social damage caused by working mothers (Descartes & Kottak, 2009). Some of the Israeli discourse also gives expression to this voice. For example, an article on the nrg news website points to the damage working mothers cause to their adolescent children:

“Your baby needs someone to feed him, put him to sleep, change his diapers, and if you are with him one hour more or one hour less, maybe you will feel pangs of conscience but he will feel this less. But actually it’s when the kids get older that this becomes more critical . . . they need you . . . there’s no substitute for a mom who has time to devote to her children” (Shtotland, *nrg*, August 8, 2012).

Interestingly, the Israeli discourse emphasises not just the damage to children caused by working mothers (in terms of emotional well-being, their schoolwork and the like), but also the personal price paid by mothers who miss out on the maternal experience. An interesting example in this regard appeared in a television interview in the wake of the Mayer incident. The interviewee, journalist Anat Lev-Adler, claimed not to be concerned about the welfare of Mayer’s newborn infant who was forced to be separated from his mother only a few days after his birth, but rather about the welfare of Mayer herself:

“I feel sorry for her for sacrificing what I see as the most personal, intimate and formative experience in favour of another day at the office . . . That they don’t let you, don’t give you the chance, that you’re a victim of circumstance, that you can’t embrace the moment you become a mother for the first time, the only time in a mother’s life . . . I feel her pain, and ours as well, I’m not worried about the baby” (Reshet, *Haolam Haboker*, August 5, 2012).

This quote illustrates how the role of mothers has been idealised and romanticised, and in this specific context also shows the glorification of the period surrounding birth, which this journalist presents as a formative experience for the feminine identity.

In contrast to the neo-liberal American narrative, which sees leaving the employment

market as a matter of individual and free choice on the part of the mothers (Vavrus, 2007; Williams, 2010), Lev-Adler expresses social criticism in her television interview. She refrains from representing Mayer's action as a free and egoistical choice, claiming that Mayer is "a victim of [social] circumstances." She explains this further in one of her opinion pieces:

"She is nothing more than an unfortunate victim of the cruel capitalistic world in which we live . . . a worldview that completely distorts what the laws of nature told us, so that instead of being parents to our children we are in effect the pawns of those who have invested in us or those who pay our salaries" (Lev-Adler, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, October 3, 2012).

Yet Lev-Adler does not exempt Mayer from all responsibility, suggesting that Mayer talk with Slaughter and learn from her how to create what the journalist describes as "balances and brakes." In the television interview, she adds: "We cannot lead our lives according to what society dictates; we need our own inner code to help us distinguish between good and bad" (Reshet, *Haolam Haboker*, August 5, 2012).

Contrary to the Anglo-American research claim that the media discourse has idealised and romanticised the maternal role, the Israeli discourse articulates a complex voice with respect to the role of mother: It glorifies motherhood, whilst at the same time casting doubts on the intensive mothering ideology.

Many items expressed a complex position with respect to the maternal role, advocating intensive and invested mothering while at the same time rejecting the ideology. An example of this can be found in Dana Spector's popular weekly column. On the one hand, Spector comes out against what she calls "the terror of the perfect mother that has become so fashionable among this generation" and against young mothers who turn into "terrified baby-making machines whose every life decision is filtered by whether it is good for my child." Yet at the same time the column's subtitle was: "Even Dana Spector must choose sides. Now, after reading the article in *The Atlantic* that stirred up America, she explains why." (Spector, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, 7 *Yamim*, July 5, 2012). Spector does not explain her choice of motherhood over career only in terms of her daughter's needs, but in terms of her emotional needs as well:

"The major barrier to being a career woman today is the desire to be loved by the children . . . I will not take on a demanding career because I want Maya [her daughter] to be close to me emotionally, and I am honest enough to admit that my own selfish need also plays a part in this" (Spector, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, 7 *Yamim*, July 5, 2012).

As can be seen from the example, the multiplicity of voices in the Israeli discourse

is reflected not only by the contradictions between one item and another, but also within a single item and even by the same speaker.

Most of the items reflect the inner conflict of those participating in the discourse. Even those who express an alternative voice with respect to the job of mothering – in that they have chosen career over home – are subject to an inner dialogue full of contradictions. One example can be seen in an item that focuses on mothers who changed careers when their children were adolescents. Alongside two mothers who describe their process of “returning home” is a mother who chose her career despite the conflict. The interviewer asks her the following question: “At any point did you think about downshifting?” To this she answers: “Despite all my thoughts in the end I didn’t leave because the need to express myself as someone who initiates and achieves things is no less important than fulfilling myself as a mother” (Shtotland, *nrg*, August 8, 2012).

As can be seen, despite the complexity and even the confusion of the Israeli discourse regarding the Slaughter and Mayer affairs, the most outstanding ideological dimension emerging from the discourse is – as in the Anglo-American literature (Descartes & Kottak, 2009) – representing the relationship between motherhood and work as one of tension and conflict, replete with feelings of guilt. The conflict, the guilt and the price paid in combining these roles find expression in the maternal context more than in the professional employment context.

Still, the Israeli discourse concerning the Slaughter and Mayer affairs also gives expression to a clear alternative voice that does not express any conflict whatsoever between motherhood and work. This alternative voice also offers a variety of ideological nuances. For example, Roni Ross, known as “the first woman in Israel who made a 20 million dollar exit” (Michaeli, *Ha’aretz*, June 29, 2012) and seen in the public discourse in Israel as symbolising the liberal model of a woman who succeeded in reaching the top of the most masculine challenges and roles, represents the unconventional viewpoint of someone who casts doubt on the assumption shared by all the participants in the discourse – that the job of raising children and keeping house is demanding:

“It’s not as difficult as it once was. Between us, it’s not difficult. Everything is prepared. Everything can be purchased . . . what, it takes you an entire day to keep up your house? I was there, I raised two children, I’m not saying that it’s merely a drop in the ocean, but it’s certainly not a full-time job” (Michaeli, *Ha’aretz*, June 29, 2012).

Other alternative voices point to the centrality of professional identity over parental identity:

“Anne-Marie Slaughter is going home in the middle of her career, but not me. I’ve

thought more than once about how I define myself. First as a mother and then as an office manager, or the other way around? Of course I'm a mother first, I rush to answer. Really? asks the witch sitting on my left shoulder. Who are you kidding? You can't wait to go to work in the morning, to get dressed, put on your makeup and leave the house . . . My job defines me much better than any other definition" (Carmi, *Yisrael Hayom, Musaf Shishabat*, July 7, 2012).

Tal Schneider, a journalist, also chose professional identity over maternal identity, yet she emphasizes her feminist stand in support of expanding the rights of women who have given birth:

I also did not want to take maternity leave. I was told I need to, I have to, and what about the child, and the world, and breast feeding. And that I can always work, my boss isn't going anywhere, and the income really doesn't matter . . . Looking back . . . I am proud of my decision [not to extend her maternity leave]. Every moment was worth it . . . I know that the things I'm writing here in this post are considered not to be legitimate and even harmful to my fellow mothers who are fighting for their rights. And I'm with them. Not one iota of the laws and the rules should be diminished, and the number of days off work after giving birth should be extended (Schneider, *Saloon*, October 3, 2012).

The media discourse on whether feminism has succeeded

As can be seen from the previous example, the media discourse concerning the Slaughter and Mayer incidents is in effect the agent of an additional discourse on this issue: Has feminism succeeded? The title of Slaughter's article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," and her explicit call for self-examination by the feminist movement together suggest a direct connection between the two. Over the years, critical feminist research about the Anglo-American media has demonstrated that while in the 1960s and 1970s the American media served as a means of disseminating feminist messages, this was a two-edged sword that selected those messages suiting the media's viewpoint – conservative messages oriented toward consumerism – while excluding anti-hegemonic messages (Bradely, 2003). In the 1980s, toward the end of the second feminist wave, the American media attacked the feminist movement with inaccurate statistical data and public opinion polls and commentaries that were not credible (Faludi, 1991). Even today, according to the feminist media researcher Andrea Press, it is difficult to find a public discussion in the American media sympathetic to feminism (Press, 2012). Likewise, the American writer and journalist Caryl Rivers claims that the American news media "sell fear" of feminism, in that they construct narratives about educated women who are not married or women who have good jobs

but are not happy (Rivers, 2007).

The Israeli discourse concerning the Slaughter and Mayer incidents echoes the discourse surrounding the question of whether feminism has succeeded, though usually only implicitly. The Israeli discourse does not make direct references to the history of the movement in the world or in Israel. This finding is in line with the findings of Israeli research indicating that the feminist discourse has seeped into the public discourse (Herzog, 2006), but also pointing to the lack of broad affinity for, and identification with the feminist movement (Safran, 2006).

The items that did make direct reference to the feminist movement are those written by women from academia. The first is the opinion column by Dr. Dahan-Kalev. The column's title, "Feminist Musings" (Dahan-Kalev, *Ha'aretz*, August 27, 2012), clearly frames the discussion in this context. The editors of the online version of this article gave it a different and more provocative title: "I also failed my attempt to realise the feminist fantasy." This title puts the feminist struggle in a negative light, for it defines feminism as unachievable and unsuccessful. Dahan-Kalev's article is linked to liberal feminism, for it reflects the liberal feminist aspiration to combine career and family: "There is still no way to combine family and career, as promised to women by the feminist fantasy of the 1970s" (Dahan-Kalev, *Ha'aretz*, August 27, 2012). The article ignored the radical feminist discourse, which proposed a change in the existing social order with respect to building a family, division of labor at home and the like.

The second item, written by Dr. Itzhaki, reflected a different position with respect to the feminist movement. Commenting on Slaughter's observation that feminists mislead when they claimed that women can have it all:

"One can certainly say, and with great admiration, that the founding generation of feminists did not lie and did not mislead . . . Without their struggle we would not be able to vote, to study, to work or to develop in various fields" (Itzhaki, *The Marker*, August 21, 2012).

In calling for overall change, Itzhaki proposes a radical feminist agenda: "Organisational culture must change so that men and women, aspiring to lead full lives, will be able to find their place within organisations. Society as a whole will benefit from this" (Itzhaki, *The Marker*, August 21, 2012).

The ideological discourse concerning motherhood vs. work – at least as reflected in this review of news items surrounding the Slaughter and Mayer affairs – revealed conservative trends toward the exclusion of men and framed the issue as the problem of individual women and not as a political and social problem. Nevertheless, the research also revealed a complex representation of the mothering role. This included voices challenging the romanticisation of motherhood and the ideology of intensive mothering, and proposing that the focus should be on the needs of the mother rather

than those of the children. A possible explanation of this complex discourse lies in the Israeli cultural context, which encourages the dual ideal of a high birthrate and a productive working life. The current article has focused on the Israeli discourse that emerged in response to the Slaughter and Mayer incidents which, as noted, attracted a great deal of attention worldwide. To understand the unique nature of the Israeli discourse, it must be compared to the discourse surrounding these two incidents in countries that have different patterns marking the participation of mothers in the work force and different economic and social characteristics. Moreover, to understand the nature of the media discourse on the issue of motherhood vs. career, the research should be expanded from a case study to a more comprehensive study examining how this issue is covered in the media over time and in different discourse arenas.

NOTE

- 1 Slaughter’s article was the most read article in the history of *The Atlantic* magazine. It attracted a million readers within a week, and 200,000 shares on Facebook (Darom, N., *The Marker*, August 18, 2012).
- 2 Lisa Belkin is a journalist, author and blogger. In October 2003 she published a column in *The New York Times* under the headline “The Opt-Out Revolution” that was the first to point out what has been called the trend of working mothers dropping out of the workforce: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/26WOMEN.html?pagewanted=all>
- 3 Kuperberg and Stone (2008) list a number of other publications in the major American media that came out after Belkin’s article and focused on drop-out mothers, among them *Time*, *New York*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the popular television series *Desperate Housewives* and a popular novel, *I Don’t Know How She Does It* by Allison Pearson (2002).
- 4 The first, a radio current events show on Reshet Bet (*Seder Yom*), discussed the Slaughter incident, and the second, on TV Channel Two’s *Haolam Haboker*, focused on the Mayer affair.
- 5 Halevi (2012), who analyzed Livni’s campaign in 2008-09, pointed to the complex task Livni faced: On the one hand, she needed to prove her “femininity” to women and feminist voters and to show that she knew how to “talk like a woman.” On the other hand, she needed to display her abilities on military and national issues.

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