

**A Token of Repression, or an Expression of Choice?  
Silence as a Social Phenomenon among Israeli Activists**

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## **A Token of Repression, or an Expression of Choice?**

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**Abstract** –feminist thought often grants great importance for giving a stage for the voices of women from all walks of life. Allowing women to be heard in the public sphere is often regarded as a political act and as an expression of empowerment, while women's silence is often linked to intersectionality, a sense of lack of knowledge and to passive positioning that is influenced by the patriarchal ideal of femininity. This dichotomic approach raises the question whether the social meaning of silence among women is solely negative and can be addressed merely through a narrow lens expressing patriarchal oppression and exclusion, or is it possible to view silence as a strategy that expresses choice.

This research deals with the lacuna in the researching of the meaning of silence among Israeli women who are not weakened, women who discovered their voices and are active in the public sphere. The research is based on a qualitative method that includes in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 31 public activities, and relates to concrete aspects of voice and silence arising from women activities in the field.

The results of the study surprised in showing silence to be a frequent starting point in the lives of most of the study participants as adults, and that a life-changing experience that can be described as an outside intervention allowed them to express an independent opinion. use their voice. The findings show that even after discovering the possibility of voice, most of the research group's participants chose silence as a strategy of resisting sexism and racism and for dealing with areas of discourse that were perceived as unequal and threatening. Only a few of the participants felt safe to take leadership positions and express critical opinions, which challenged the existing discourse. In most cases, this choice was viewed by them as a privilege. These findings forged the understanding the democracy is a necessary but insufficient condition for women's voices in Israel and raised the question of how it is possible to strengthen the voices of women and their liberty regarding their ability to express their opinions publicly.

**Keywords:** public sphere, deliberative democracy, gender equality, social engagement, voice and gender, women's leadership, women in Israel

## Introduction

The ability to maintain a discourse dealing with contemporary affairs depends upon the existence of a public space that enables open communication processes. Whether we accept Habermas's characterization of the appropriate public sphere (Habermas 1991), or we join the critiques about the ideal aspects in his description (Fraser, 1992; Benhabib, 1993; Lubin, 2013), we can agree that voice – as an expression of the ability to constitute an independent standpoint – is the main mean of participation in public life, while silence is one of the central expressions of refraining from action in the public domain.

In Israel, as a democratic country, the ability of voice is seemingly open equally to women and men, from all walks of life. Nevertheless, a look at the focal points of public discourse and action reveals a small and deficient presence of women in relation to men (Tzameret-Kurtzer and others, 2017). This situation, which exists despite the growing awareness of the importance of women's active participation in public life, led to the implication of the term "the gender equality myth" (Herzog, 2006).

In the feminist research literature, we can identify two opposing views regarding the meaning of silence among women: the first views silence as a product of oppression, while the second as a product of resistance to oppression. On the one hand, silence is shown to indicate lack of knowledge, difficulty in thinking, and inability to create meaning among women who suffer from a low socio-economic background and a history of abuse (Belenkey et al., 1997). In addition, silence is described as a state of passive dependence that occurs from submission to oppressive social norms that govern women (Dowling, 1981). On the other hand, silence is sometimes presented as an act of choice and resistance. It is perceived as the weapon of weakened social groups, among them intersectional women, who find in silence a tool of resistance and striving against the hegemonic voice (Scott, 1985; Nagar-Ron, 2009, Sa'ar, 2007).

These opposing perceptions reinforce the importance of examining the meanings of aspects of voice and silence, as expressions of taking a position or of avoiding it, among women who are active in the public sphere in Israel. This study examines the issue with the aim of exploring the place of silence among women on the continuum between oppression and choice, from the point of view of women who wish to express their

views publicly; it focuses on the question of whether silence among women is forced by the presence of oppressive social structures that lead to feelings of helplessness or, alternatively, can be seen as the product of choice based on calculated strategy.

The research seeks to provide an answer to the existing lacuna in the study of the subject (First, 2017), with the understanding that this is an area whose importance lies not only in addressing the voices of women in the public sphere, but also in interpreting the influence of power relations on the abilities of disadvantaged groups to participate in public communication processes that take place publicly.

The research is based on categorizing and analyzing recurring themes in the descriptions of the experiences of thirty-one women who are active in the Israeli public sphere and are characterized by the existence of a voice and the willingness to speak publicly. During the personal in-depth interviews, the women were asked about their experiences regarding their participation in the public discourse, in order to understand their subjective point of view on the issues of silence and voice.

The question of the ability of women to voice themselves publicly is interdisciplinary as it is related to various aspects of human life. The following review examines the definitions of the public sphere according to Habermas and Arendt and present feminist's critics on their perceptions. It brings forth research literature on different aspects of voice and silence, as reviews researches on women as a socially silenced group.

### **Habermasian Aspects of the Public Sphere**

When we explore the meaning of voice – that is the ability to express an opinion – we immediately encounter the question regarding the environment that allows it to be heard. As Habermas (1991) noted, the ability to formulate an independent opinion and influence the social agenda depends upon the existence of a public space, which provides room for discussion on the common good. But what is that space that allows the establishment of the voice? Habermas defined the public sphere as a physical or virtual place that allows listening and arguing out of an independent and free will. The public sphere, he finds, is formed in every conversation in which private people unite into a public.

The historical social process that led to the establishment of the public sphere is

described by Habermas as having begun with the rise in the literacy rate, the increased accessibility to books and newspapers, and the advancements of equality, freedom and civil rights. This change led to the development of a bourgeois class aware of its rights and interests vis-à-vis the establishment; The ability to hold critical discussions on cultural, social, and political matters enabled to creation of communities of a socio-political nature that engaged in a critical discourse on political and social issues and constituted a focus of power embodied in public opinion.

Since the public space is connected to the principle of freedom, it requires preconditions. These include according to Habermas a few main aspects: the temporary suspension of status and power differences and the possibility for all citizens to participate in the discourse, out of voluntary participation, as part of a rational discussion aimed at the common good. That is a discourse that takes place during an unforced meeting, out of confidence in the civil right to convene, to unite and discuss issues of public interest, not within a specific role, or out of private interest.

Fraser (1992) criticizes a large part of Habermas' views, arguing that the public space he presented does not describe reality as it existed on the ground. Instead, she presents alternative historiography to his ideal conception; she raises questions about the assumption that the participants in the public discourse can put their differences in parentheses in parentheses and take part in the discussion as if they are class-equal. Her argument is based on the observation that even at a time when the discourse is ostensibly egalitarian, and ethnic or gender-based exclusions are not acceptable, they are still kept informally. According to her, the suspension of class, ethnic and gender differences – works for the benefit of the strong and does not advance the interests of the weak by creating a false common denominator.

In addition, Fraser shows how women were not part of the bourgeois public sphere and suffered from exclusion. According to her, a large number of competing spaces existed simultaneously; These public spaces included elite women and working-class women who were organized separately and created for themselves paths for political life, despite their exclusion from the official public sphere. Frazer challenges the distinction between the private sphere and the public sphere, noting that there is no natural criterion that distinguishes between the private and the public. According to her, these are social criteria that can change over time; Thus, for example, in the case of domestic violence, which has been transformed by feminist discourse into a public sphere subject to

legislation and punishment.

### **Arendtian Aspects of the Public Sphere**

Habermas' discourse on the public sphere was preceded by Arendt (2013), which also influenced his conception (Breese, 2011). While Habermas focused on the social characteristics of the public sphere, Arendt also focuses on the dynamics of participation in public life and how it influences individual life. Arendt (2013) refers to the *action*, expressed in speech and activity, as the elements on which the public sphere is based. This is the arena in which people express their opinions freely, affect each other and leave their mark in the world. This domain is fundamentally different from the two other domains of human life: *labor*, which is required to satisfy the primary needs of existence, and is carried out primarily in spaces that have no public connection and *work* that produces the objects that make up the material world.

Arendt's historical review of the creation of the public sphere goes back to the days of ancient Greece. Looking back at the Greek polis, Arendt observes the manner in which it served as a deliberative public sphere, in which decisions were made based on words and persuasion. In contrast to the violence and the control displayed in the unequal private sphere, the political sphere was the place in which freedom was established, and those who belonged there got to be equals among equals. The relation between the private and the public was that the first allows the existence of the second. That is, the ownership of the house allowed the freedom to engage in public matters. Those who matched the requested criteria were allowed to move freely in a sphere free from the relation of control and obedience.

However, according to feminist perceptions, Arendt's separation between the personal and the political space is unacceptable. This is according to the basic observation that "the personal is the political" (Willis, 2012). Benhabib (1993) notes that assumptions that control the boundaries of the public sphere and limit it to action in contrast to labor, or separate it from "social" aspects cannot be protected. Different forms of work and labor can constitute public spaces, if they are challenged reflexively and examined by reference to the asymmetric relationship system that manages them.

According to Benhabib, the existence of a public sphere depends on the fact that the action does not take place through a bureaucratic and administrative apparatus and does

not advance itself through the institutional systems. Rather, it is a space of discourse that allows us to move from shame to argument, from private blindness to public visibility; Something that is possible through the process of deciphering experiences that were previously considered personal and private and turning them into political ones, and hence also worthy of discourse that promotes social change.

Lubin (2013) also criticizes the hermetic separation of Habermas and Arendt between the private and the public. According to her, this thought is flawed by the lack of reference to how the sphere allocated to each gender acts as a mechanism of exclusion, policing, and imprisonment. In other words, the power relations that are built within the division between the private and the public create and preserve in an interest-based manner, hierarchical differences that place the man in the center, as the one acting in the public sphere while turning the woman into a subordinate in the private sphere.

Lubin emphasizes the manner in which feminist discourse allows to negate the very existence of a hierarchy between public and personal space. Therefore, she stresses the importance of a research choice that relates to the personal experience of women in order to expose the mechanisms that determine gender distribution while denying binary. Yihye-Yunis (2013) elaborates on the liminal aspect between the two spaces and how the dynamic reality in the field cannot be reduced binarily. In addition to the concepts that show flexibility in the transition between different spheres, one can also speak of "domestic power" as describing the activities, positions, and roles of women around the house as having a great influence on a variety of political, economic areas (Sa'ar, 2007).

The definition of a suitable public sphere also exists in a research discourse that deals with the definition of "safe spaces" designed to protect women and minority groups from the violence of the majority (Hartl and others, 2014). A safe space structures an array of resistance to the familiar oppressive powers; this through internal discourse that builds a community. In such a space, narratives of trauma, shared suffering or shame become sources of strength, security and motivation for action.

## **On Silence**

Observing public space as a discursive sphere for voice and exchange of opinion raises the question of the meaning of silence in reference to the possibilities of public expression available to women. Are the gender and social meaning of silence solely

negative and to be treated merely through a narrow prism of expression of patriarchal oppression? Or is it possible to see silence as an act that expresses choice?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to distinguish between a silence that appears alongside the speech as part of the discourse, which is referred to as a "talking silence," and a silence that occurs outside the boundaries of the discourse, and can be referred to as "stillness" (Efrat, 2007).

Among the roles of talking silence, it is possible to enumerate emphasizing what has been said, pausing for answers and thinking, and additional aspects that bestow silence with meaning. This silence is different from *stillness*, in the sense that the latter means a total absence from the discourse (Efrat, 2007).

In addition, as Baker (1955) points out, there is a place to distinguish between silence as an act of choice and silence as a necessity. This is when silence as an act of choice can mark an agency's place, while silence as a necessity indicates places and situations of lack of possibilities.

When referring to the meaning of silence, there is importance in the situation in which it is created. For example, the silence described by Baudrillard (2005) as the refusal of those who are unwilling that others will speak on their behalf. Another example is the silence of women interviewed about their lives who draw on the power of silence stemming from the ability to choose what they want to tell and what to silence; as well as a way of dealing with a situation of inequality between them and the interviewer (Nagar-Ron, 2009).

In these contexts, it is important to understand questions related to the ability of disadvantaged social groups, including women, to participate in the discourse; As Spivak (1995) phrased it, "can the subordinates speak?".

Spivak pointed to the class system, embodied in the perception of knowledge and creating a politics of power relations. Thus, women who come from marginal classes whose language does not meet the rules of hegemonic discourse will not be able to enjoy an equal attitude, since they will be considered inarticulate.

According to her, it is not enough to give a voice to the subordinate subject, but it is necessary to understand this voice within the framework of the hegemonic social order and the power and oppression systems that operate on weakened social groups. This is consistent with the view of Bourdieu (2005) who described the manner in which silence



is related to social power relations; this is when a sense of incompetence in language and understanding that may cost a social price leads to self-censorship and silence. This, while a sense of lack of eloquence and the understanding that it might come with a social price lead to self-censorship and silence.

As Bruneau (1973) points out, silence is associated with emotional aspects and it is often a product of shock due to intense emotions such as insult, oppression or repression. Moreover, silence can signify a fear of authority and respect for an authoritative figure in a higher socioeconomic status.

At the same time, as Scott (1985) claims, silence can be the weapon of the weak. It can express contempt toward groups in hegemonic positions and can be used as a strategic way to hide actions from those in power.

Silence can also indicate a lack of sense of knowledge. Belenky and her colleagues (1986) who interviewed 135 women about the ways in which they expressed their knowledge, chose silence as the first of five perspectives of knowledge. This as a way to characterize women who felt unable to accept or create knowledge. That is, those who lack confidence in their thinking abilities and in their power to create and share meaning.

The social price of silence can be deduced from the study of Neula-Neumann (1995). According to her, individuals often choose to remain silent in order not to risk social isolation by expressing a view which stands in opposition to what is perceived as the majority opinion. Thus, a "spiral of silence" is created, according to which the unwillingness of the individual to reveal his or her views publicly, out of a lack of awareness that many others share similar thoughts, turns minority opinion into what is considered as the common opinion.

### **On Voice**

Contrary to silence, which is not dependent on interaction with others and can indicate a complete absence from the discourse, speech involves interaction between two or more people, whose interaction is based on a common basic starting point, such as knowledge of the same language (Baker, 1955).

The power relations between speech and silence are not equal. Speech usually has more power than silence, because verbal communication is stronger than nonverbal communication (Jaworski, 1993). Also, since speech provides a system of assumptions

to his understanding, it is more likely that it will be less ambiguous than silence.

Tyler (1978) notes that speech contains what is said, thinking about what is about to be said, and anticipating what is about to be said. Hence, the speech also includes the silence, as the background of preconceptions and applications created from the things that are bring said.

However, even if we see speech as a combination of what is being said and what is not being said, there is a significant difference between silence and speech. While there is in silence a confirmation of the existing situation, as the term "silence is consent" teaches, and the assumption that if someone objects what is being said, it will be expressed through words (Jensen, 1973), speech has a practical aspect.

Austin (2006) refers to the performative aspect of the expression and shows how, at times, saying things actually means acting in the world. This concept is similar to the perception presented by Arendt (2013) who talks about how speech can roll in the world until the end of time. These insights reinforce the understanding that words have an actual practical and performative power and they can move around the world through time and make things change.

At the same time, language does not necessarily reflect only a communicative process, and it cannot always be presented as the opposite of silence. Hence, it is not possible to relate to it only as a welcomed reversal to a situation in which silence expresses the potential violence of force (Benhabib, 1993); as Bourdieu (1991) notes, language can be a tool for expressing authority, validating the social order and even violence, when it reflects a states of authority.

Moreover, as Almog (2001) argues, since the Hebrew language carries a gender bias, it acts latently to reinforce the existing social order, with its hierarchical and patriarchal aspects. Thus, as Benjamin (2003) points out, women's' use of voice can be referred to as un-silencing; a practice which carries a risk aspect, which requires resources that include symbolic capital and an alternative group of belonging. This is also echoed by Lord (1996), which states that the transition from silence to speech is a step that involves a sense of danger.

At the same time, the voice metaphor in the feminist research literature is used to indicates the empowerment of women (Bielski, 2002); this, while the concept of voice is perceived as an expression of subjectivity and feminine self (Lev Canaan, 2002). On

the other hand, silence is presented as a sign of lack of strength and weakness (Bielski, 2002). Similarly, according to Pepperman (2011) voice expresses self-representation, while silence is an expression of the inability to represent the self, due to exterior influences which lead to submission and passivity.

### **Voice and Silence Among Women**

The Voice Metaphor in feminist research literature indicates the empowerment of women (Bielski, 2002), and the concept has become a common expression for subjectivity and feminine power (Lev Canaan, 2002). Silence, on the other hand, is frequently presented as a sign of oppression and of social weakness (Bielski, 2002). Similarly, according to Pepperman (2011), who indicates that voice expresses self-representation, while silence is an expression of the inability to represent the self, in private or as a group, because of the use of external force, that leads to submission and passivity.

Lakoff (1992) argues that socialization processes that go on for many generations create an unconscious recognition of silence with femininity and voice with a lack of femininity. Hence, women were deterred from using a clear and sharp voice, out of fear of being perceived as unfeminine. Rogers (1993) also finds that for women, the use of voice requires overcoming rooted images of femininity and masculinity.

Women often feel it is dangerous to say what they want, what they think, or even know it (Gilligan, 1995). Dowling (1983) notes that women become passive, dependent and quieter because of socialization processes. While boys are encouraged to voice themselves and take to take initiative, girls are educated to be nice, and to behave quietly. As a result, in adulthood women experience greater difficulties to speak in public and often lack the confidence to voice their opinions firmly. According to Bielski (2002) Western culture perceived the female voice as dangerous, anarchic and threatening the existing situation and therefore acted to limit it and push it out.

These aspects of the suppression of the female voice sharpen the research question that seeks to solve the gap between women's silence as an act of conscious choice that is stemming from strategic motives in a given situation, and silence as a necessity and an expression of social oppression of women's ability to express an independent opinion.

### **Research Purpose and Question**

As aforesaid, the research of silence is tightly connected to the exploration of the power-relations on the ability of weakened groups to participate in the public discourse. The

research asks, therefore, to answer the lacuna in the research of this topic in the aim of focusing on the meaning of silence among women on the Continuum between suppression and choice. The research examines the questions if silence among women is only the result of oppression social constructions that lead to a feeling of helplessness, or can it is possible to view it as a product of agency and calculated thought.

## **Method**

This research is qualitative and is based on analyzing 31 personal interviews aimed to examine the range between voice and silence in the lives of Israeli women who are active in the public sphere. The research is part of a larger work, that included two rounds of interviews before and after workshops on digital literacy. The research is based on the first round of interviews before the workshops took place.

### **The participants**

The women in the research group were recruited by a call for participation that was published in various forms and networks on the internet. It was also published in social organizations, newsletters, and groups. the criteria for research-group members were based on two conditions: First, being active in the public sphere. That is women activists who have already found their voice and are activists. Secondly, their public activity did not occur online but offline.

The 31 participants were women who acquired expertise in public activity and leadership positions in a wide range of fields; it included political activism, social involvement, leadership positions in social groups, and volunteering in the community. Alongside participants from central areas of Israel, such as Tel-Aviv, Ramat Gan, Raanana, Holon, and Petah Tikva, many came from more distant places such as Jerusalem, Haifa, Be'er Sheva and Eilat, and places such as Yavne and Kiryat Ekron, Kafr Shaab, Kfar Hess and Zoran. The average level of education of the participants was high, and was characterized by advanced studies. It included 5 women with high school education, 2 students, 1 accountant, 3 lawyers, 4 with a BA diploma, 11 with an MA degree, 4 who defined themselves as academics and 1 doctoral student. The income level of most of the participants was average. 7 They did not answer the question. 15 defined themselves as having an average income. 3 defined themselves below average. 6 defined themselves above the average. 29 of the participants are Jewish, one Muslim and one Christian. 14 defined the land of their origin as European. 2 Israel, 3 Asia, 2

Asia-Europe, 4 Africa, 1 Germany, 1 Yemen, 1 Morocco, 1 Greece-Yugoslavia, 1 Asia-Africa, and 1 Tunis.

Apart from 3 participants, all the participants asked to be mentioned by pseudo name.

## **Interviews**

The study is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews, which enabled asking the women on experiences of voice and silence in different aspects of their public involvement. These interviews allowed to have a personal interaction with each member of the research group, gain insights to the topics in question, and to examine the perception of silence and voice on the range between suppression and choice (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

interaction with the research group, clarification of the issues discussed, and examination of the participants' perception of reality.

The research method was designed to understand the subjective point of view of the participants and to locate repeated patterns from their descriptions in the public sphere (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Lieblich et al., 2010). The interviews were conducted by using a categorical inductive approach, which relates to the personal stories of the research-group participants in a manner that enables reaching the concept of the whole. This was done by identifying themes that recur in various interviews as a basis for understanding the existence of repetitive and significant phenomena and patterns in the public activity of women in Israel.

I conducted the interviews in a short time of a few weeks and personally transcribed them. Most of the interviews took place in coffee houses and public spaces. 4 interviews were conducted at the homes of the interviewees, three through Skype. The longest interview lasted 5 hours and the shortest one 45 minutes.

## **Findings**

The interviews analysis lead to three categories: the category "Initial Silence: The Late Birth of the Voice" displays the story of finding voice among women as a dramatic occurrence and not as something self-explanatory; the category "Abstaining Silence as an Act of Choice" deals with the places in which women keep silence, abstain from expressing an opinion, or "soften" their voice in a manner that conveys on choice; the category "Women's Voice as Privilege" describes how in place where women allowed

themselves to make themselves heard, they felt that they speak from a standpoint of privilege, that is not available for everyone.

It is important to note that the interviews did not show distinction based on ethnicity, between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi or between Jewish and Arab. One of the reasons for that is all the participants were to begin with empowered women who discovered their voices and were active in the public sphere.

### **Initial Silence: The Late Birth of the Voice**

The research group was characterized from the beginning by women who have voice and capabilities of leadership, and their selection was based by their public involvement in a variety of fields. This raised the question of how the participants became public activists and how they discovered their voices. At the beginning of each of the interviews, the participants were asked about their public involvement and about the path that had led them to become socially engaged.

The answers surprised because they demonstrate the extent to which voice among adult women is not self-explanatory. Out of the thirty-one participants in the research group, twenty-eight women described how they discovered their voice only at a later stage of their life. Most of them described how this process occurred after participation in a women's leadership or empowerment workshop. For example, Galli, became a facilitator of women circles, as a result of the women's empowerment workshop she attended:

**Galli:** Look, since I went through a women empowerment course, I empower every woman I see around.... I find myself gaining more and more confidence. If once I used to say a word here and there, today I can lecture and explain things... able to talk to a large group.

Galli went on and described how her life has changed dramatically, in a wide variety of fields, out of the understanding that she can express her opinion. A similar description emerges from the words of Aggie, a member of a Steering Committee in a women's movement, who is active in several social frameworks:

**Aggie:** Before I knew [a name of a women's movement] I thought this was the world. That's life. Today I know that there is room to influence others, to create change.

As Aggie continued to talk, she described the meaning of the turning point which occurred in her life and changed them beyond recognition. Such descriptions were portrayed repeatedly by various women in the group. In most cases, the change was

described in dramatic terms of "before" and "after", which characterized a shift from a lack of voice to a sense of influence and a sense of having a voice.

The findings point to the birth of the voice among women as a dramatic process, which occurs in most cases later in life. This aspect, which emerged from the study, strengthens the understanding that the social structures that exist in the public sphere do not support the voice of women. In many cases, as Benjamin (2003) claimed, alternative spaces are needed, which provide a sense of security and support, and alternative and reflexive practices that enable a discourse that examines the occurrences in order to enable the very existence of the voice.

These descriptions of the silence that precedes the voice's discovery among public activists show how educated, career-oriented women may be unaware, until a relatively late stage in their lives, of their ability to voice themselves and to express their opinions in public.

### **Abstaining Silence as an Act of Choice**

As soon as women were able to claim a hold on the existence of their voice, the question of the possibility of silence was raised more intensely. This is especially true among women who are experienced in using their voices. The interviews repeatedly pointed to cases and examples of women who chose to remain silent in various situations, and took what might be called "abstaining silence." Mozayan, a young social activist who described at the beginning of the interview how her family's support and the path she made in social movements enabled her to act in the world with a sense of voice, refers to the cases in which she finds silence as a smart choice:

**Mozayan:** You have a short time, you save yourself the looks, you go for the easiest. You do not express your opinion fully. In some places, I go and express my opinion fully. In other places, very poorly. A person should be very smart. Not to say "This is me, accept me as I am." A person has to be careful. To save a lot of energy and racism from the other side, and looks that want to kill you in a second. This is a choice.

Mozayan's description illustrates the connection between voice and the public space in which the social interaction exists and where the voice can be heard. The gender aspect of the choice of silence takes place behind the scenes in the description of the charged atmosphere, expressed in the politics of horrifying glances. This familiar form of repression is discussed in feminist literature, which deals with a threatening gaze as a manifestation of masculine power directed mainly at women as a way to discipline them

in space (Kaplan, 1977). The threatening gaze exemplifies the manner in which semi-concealed violent practices can take over the discourse through frightening gestures, which take place in a seemingly open to all participants space.

According to Mozayan's perception, the expression of the basic concept of liberty - "This is me, accept me as I am" – takes a toll that she is not interested in paying. She, therefore, chooses to be cautious and not to express her opinion in certain cases. The right to say what she thinks and present herself as she is becomes difficult to implement in the face of implicit threats directed at those who do not respond to dominant views in the discussion. This description sharpens the connection between the voice and the possibilities given by the space in which it wishes to be heard.

Another example of the choice of abstaining silence in the face of agents of power can be found in Irit's words, whose activity in the civilian field led her to a great deal of involvement with military elements:

**Irit:** In interactions with army business personal, where there is give and take ... I often will not voice my opinions, so as not to sabotage ... the interest-relationship there. By the way, even in the feminist context, working with the army is terrible. It brings me back light-years.... I have a lot of interaction with the conflict, because I deal with permits, I need them to be on my good side. I swallow a lot of frogs. Lots of colonels who flirt with me: "It was good last night" like extreme hardcore. I drive in the car and talk to someone who knows he is on the speaker: "You did not tell him about our affair" What's now? You would argue with him? What's the use?

Irit describes the manner in which she restricts her words when she talks to a military man with whom she is in a professional relationship. The need for military permits leads her to the choice to restrict her voice, and not to respond to sexist jokes that carry characteristics of sexual harassment. Irit, who defines herself as a feminist from an early age, is well aware that this is inappropriate talk which crosses the professional borders in the pretense of a harmless jest; although the demonstration of power that is applied in terms of class and gender does not evade her eyes, she chooses as instrumental behavior, that focuses on achieving her goal, and uses an abstaining silence.

In the words of Mozayan and Irit, we can find a demonstration of the conditions both Habermas (1991) and Arendt (2013) described in relation to a suitable public space. Their words illustrate how a space in which status distinctions are emphasized, hidden or overt threats are felt, and power relationship exists, discursive freedom is undermined. These spaces lead to the choice of an abstaining silence as a strategic way



for women with a voice to deal with unequal spaces of discourse.

While choosing abstaining silence in situations that felt unsafe and where the power structure was unequal, most women described the manner in which they make their voices heard in places where they felt safe.

**Shira:** I feel like I'm avoiding using my voice, because I feel that it's not promoting anything. People do not want to hear ... Where I feel comfortable, I am making myself heard. At my home for sure. Even there, I sometimes don't say everything because they don't want to hear. Sometimes I force them.

**Esther:** I need to feel safe where I am and then I'll say what I have to say, but I soften it.

A space characterized by insensitivity and lack of listening may lead to self-silencing. The fact that women are less listened to than men (Fraser, 1992; Karpowitza, Mendelberga, & Shakera, 2012) works by itself to produce silencing.

Shira, who is active in a variety of fields in civil society, describes a situation that was present in many other interviews, and created a separation between spaces worthy of voice and spaces that are unworthy of that. She said she would prefer not to express her opinion in places where she did not feel comfortable and there is no interest in hearing what she had to say. Esther, who is active as a volunteer, notes the connection between a sense of security in the space and voice. Furthermore, the fact that she describes how her words undergo a process of softening is associated with women's socialization to be nice and pleasant (Dowling, 1983).

The presence of the voice or its discovery among women is, therefore, a necessary but insufficient condition for its expression. Common social practices of not listening to women (Karpowitza et al., 2012) create a situation in which existing voices will not always be expressed. In this manner, the hegemonic social order preserves its power and its oppression of women, where their choice of silence occurs in the face of a space that does not accept their voice:

**Simon:** I chose the silent role. The one who does not know how to ask. Innocent is not good, Smart is not good. The One that does not Know how to Ask, and then it seems more than simple. On the face of it, I do not really like it, but I think that's what I've chosen for now.

There are those who view silence in situations where class discourse is unequal a type of strength (Nagar-Ron, 2014). However, it is possible to agree that, as Arendt (2013)

described it, the ability to express oneself in speech and in action and live a life of liberty can only exist fully in a space that offers equality. When a given space is characterized by inequality, the choice becomes largely forced and constrained.

Simon, who has worked for years to strengthen weakened populations, notes her choice of silence as a comprehensive and yet temporary one. Her reference to a choice based on the traditional Passover Haggadah suggests that it takes place in a gendered social context with limited possibilities, to begin with. The choice she makes to refer to the four sons the Torah corresponded to, and to take upon herself the role of "the one who does not know how to ask," is ironic for it is a choice that stems from a situation with no desirable possibilities.

### **Women's Voice as a Privilege**

Alongside the descriptions of abstaining silence, softening of the voice, or making oneself heard only in a supportive environment and places where there is listening, there were women who were willing to voice their opinions also in the face of resistance:

**Merav:** I feel completely safe. I am not afraid .... to voice myself aloud, also with my own name... to speak out loud, even with my name .... I rose riots, when I used my name and protested, and **I knew I would pay prices, and I knew I would pay prices**, and I said fine. I am not afraid. You hear me everywhere, both at home and outside. (My emphasis)

**Iris:** I have no problem expressing my opinions. I grew up in the kibbutz, the most conformist place, and **it is not always easy**. (My emphasis)

In order to answer the question of what made saying one's opinion possible, one can relate to Benjamin (2003), who considered the act to be *unsilencing* a risk-taking activity that requires resources, such as alternative belonging and symbolic capital. This aspect was prominent among the group of women who were willing to voice themselves in a hostile environment. This, in the sense that they all had a resume of ongoing activity in a social movement they were highly attached to.

Merav and Iris, who describe how they are prepared to voice themselves in the face of resistance, are two activists whose public activity has an immanent part of their lives for years. The first is a social activist for disadvantaged communities and the second is a peace activist.

Despite the strong stance on the ability to voice oneself in any situation, both descriptions reflect the difficulty in sharing an unpopular opinion. On the one hand, the two women describe themselves decisively as filled with confidence in allowing their

voices to be heard publicly. On the other hand, they emphasize, again and again, the difficulty of this practice. In Merav's words, it can be seen in the emphasis on the price she is prepared to pay for the right to express herself freely. In Iris's words, there is a contrast between the conformity of her environment and the difficulty in expressing her opposing voice.

It is possible to see the difficulty by which the activists described the expression of opinion publicly as related to the manner in which the prevailing culture produces "natural" differences between women and men, while attributing the ability and legitimacy of expressing an opinion to masculine behavior (Franze, 1991). Thus, the question arises whether the public space is indeed open to all opinions, regardless of gender, and whether any woman can see herself as worthy of expressing an opinion.

The choice to make oneself heard in the face of resistance is not automatic, but described as dependent on relevant circumstances and considerations. Yet it is still associated with a sense of entitlement. Here is an account of Irit, who had previously described how she chooses abstaining silence in her connections with military officials:

Irit: I do not experience life as trouble. I always say **I have a privilege**. I come from a place of having a lot of confidence. I am aware of that. The confidence to be opinionated, to say what I think, **to stand in front of resistance, to say things that people do not say, to be nonconformist**. (My emphasis)

Irit's description of being a privileged woman indicates how being an opinionated woman who expresses her world-view is not something that is accepted and experienced as a basic act of civic life. The ability to "say what I think" is connected with the description of the sense of self-confidence to say things in the face of opposition. This sense of confidence is presented as a primary tool for dealing with the conformist concepts which one encounters in the field. Hence, participation in the public discourse, which is one of the basic conditions for living in a democratic state, is portrayed as a kind of privilege granted by those whose symbolic capital is expressed in a deeply rooted sense of confidence.

The significance of a sense of privileged position can also be seen from the words of Sophie, a social activist who headed a civic movement and acts as a facilitator of empowerment workshops for women:

**Sophie:** I participated two weeks ago in an event in which there was a panel with a facilitator, two men and one woman.... In the end, there was a round of questions and the woman was not asked any question. The facilitator turned to

those who were asked and asked them to answer. I told him, "I request that you will also give her the time to speak." She started talking too ... Afterward, people turned to me and said, "Well done". I analyzed myself afterward and said that I could have made that remark because I have the confidence.... **I felt I was in a position to say things that not everyone can.** Not only to say, but also to make things happen. He couldn't have dismissed me. Several times, I noticed that there were other women who see such things and do not comment. (My emphasis)

The event Sophie describes illustrates the interaction that takes place in a public space that ostensibly promotes free discussion and discourse, but actually turns out to be biased and silencing when it comes to women (DeVault, 1999; Karpowitza et al., 2012). Sophie's description illustrates not only the quantitative exclusion of women from public discourse, which is expressed in this case in a panel with a single woman participant versus three men. It also points to the gender inequality within the discourse, which is demonstrated by the fact that the facilitator does not include the only women participant in the discussion that takes place after the audience's questions. Thus, it intensifies the aspect of silencing on the basis of gender, which exists in any case in the representation of the single woman. This representation sharpens male dominance and makes the voice and the presence of the woman weaker compared to the three men.

Like Irit, Sophie, who compares her voice to others who "see and do not remark," sees herself as privileged. Breaking the circles of silence and intervening in the discourse are characterized as a unique situation, which is not reserved for everyone. The confidence of stating one's opinion and the status of Sophie in the discourse allows her not only to express her opinion in public, but also for this opinion to be taken into account and to promote a change in the situation.

However, it is precisely this description of making one's voice heard that validates the bias of the entire discourse. Not only does it teach that special self-confidence is required in order to participate in the discourse, but also a status that is acquired over years in the field of activity, in order for what was said to be properly responded to. In other words, it is possible that someone else who had the courage to say these things would encounter silence and perhaps even shaming from the hegemonic powers who are conducting the discourse.

It is, therefore, possible to understand that the discourse takes place in heterogeneous spaces that are only seemingly open to equal voicing of each participant. This problem is embodied in the panel stage in the quantitative and qualitative exclusion of women from the discourse, and among the audience - in the difficulty of women who do not feel confident to speak out publicly. Fadia, co-director of a movement that promotes

the rights of women from a minority group:

**Fadia: Are you confident in expressing your opinions?** Depends on where and when, what is the context, and what is the subject. Again, where I hangout I feel pretty safe, it does not always happen. It depends on the context. I do not feel like I'm a person who cannot influence others, or cannot make my voice heard. **I walk around the world with the feeling that I can.** I make my calculations. It's not always smart to say what I think. The feeling is that because I live [in the name of the mixed city in which she lives] and hang out with feminist women in environments that suit me, **I have the privilege to speak.** I feel **I can say what I think.** (My emphasis)

The interviews show that freedom of expression is not taken for granted, but is consistently conceptualized as a privilege. In other words, women are required to have preconditions that will enable them to express themselves freely in the face of an unsupportive discourse environment. This stands in contrast to the Israeli Declaration of Independence, which embodies the principle of freedom of expression as a supreme right in constitutional law and Israeli society.<sup>1</sup>

Fadia refers to her ability to express her opinion as a privilege associated with the city in which she lives, the environment in which she operates and the fact that, like her, her colleagues are feminist and belong to the same discourse field. From her words and other women's descriptions, it can be seen that the ability to realize the participation in the public sphere from an opposing standpoint is made possible after the establishment of a public identity, acquired through ongoing activity among a group that shares a similar social vision. This activity provides an alternative affiliation framework (Benamin, 2003), and enables the accumulation of security and familiarity in the area of activity

Alongside that, the interviews reveal that among all of the women who expressed confidence in their ability to voice themselves in face of opposition, there were also places in which they felt less assured to say what they think. Thus, it became clear that even among these women there was a practice of using abstaining silence.

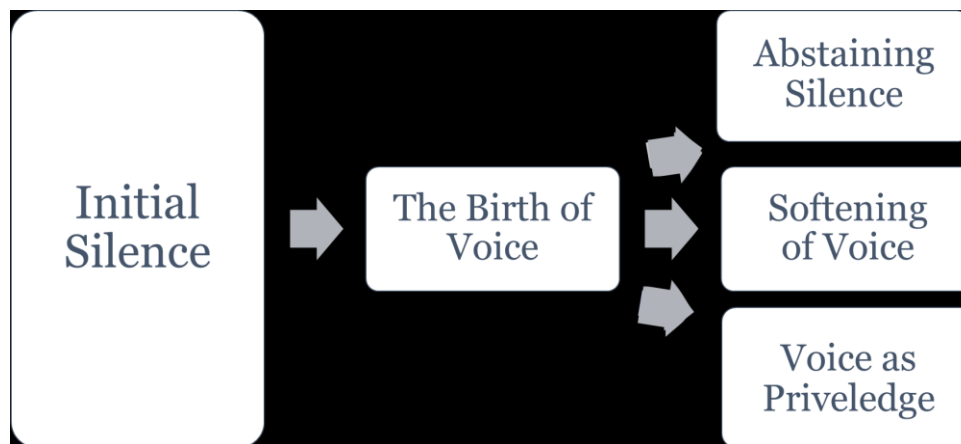
## Conclusion

This study explored the issue of voice and silence among women activists in Israel. It

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<sup>1</sup> See Shimon Agranat about freedom of speech, based on the Declaration of Independent in Bagatz Kol Ha'am, and the regulatory validation given to the declaration by Aharon Barak in his Vol. 3 of his book on interpretation of law.

referred to the question of whether silence is a product of oppression and helplessness, or whether it is a deliberate choice expressing an agency. The analysis of the interviews led to an understanding of the process expressed in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: Aspects of Silence and Voice among Israeli Activists*

The silence as an experience of subversive social oppression was discussed in the category of "Initial Silence: The Late Birth of Voice" - this finding raises issues concerning freedom of choice; while they are assured socially and by law they are not always expressed in practice. While studies can deal with these issues theoretically, it is important to understand these matters from real-life experiences. The repeated experiences that describe a state of initial silence prior to the discovery of the voice indicate that the freedom that exists de jure is not necessarily the freedom of speech that takes place de facto.

It can be said that the basic democratic principle of freedom of speech is a necessary but insufficient condition for the full realization of the freedom to express an opinion. In order to actualize freedom of speech so that women's voices and actions can be expressed publicly, not only preconditions are required, as indicated by research literature, but also encouraging conditions, which have not yet been properly discussed. In relation to women, the establishment of the public self in the social system through speech and action does develop by itself. It is a process that depends upon the social structure that enables the birth of the voice and the possibilities of it being effective.

The findings indicate that there is a place to relate to different types of silence among women; that is necessary to observe the difference between initial silence that expresses oppression and the silence that occurs after the discovery of the voice, that can be seen as an act of choice.

The study shows that in many cases a sense of lack of voice, that is the difficulty in

forming and expressing opinions is, in fact, a common situation among many women, including educated women with means and careers who grew up in normative families and were not abused. This finding contradicts the findings of studies linking silence to social weakness. This contradiction is particularly striking in relation to the research of Belenky and her colleagues (1997), whose first category, "Silence," is described as the oppressive product that defines young women suffering from economic, educational and social deprivation. These women saw themselves as stupid and did not feel they are able to express knowledge. However, women who described their initial silence in this study did not think they were unable to express knowledge or were not smart. Their difficulty was expressed in their sense of entitlement and readiness to express their opinions and worldviews.

The study further suggests that in order to escape from a state of initial silence, intervention is often required. In a small number of cases, it was a reflexive process, created by reading or a series of internal processes that led to an understanding of personal independence. However, among most of the women, the descriptions revolve around a life-changing external factor, which can be seen as an act of "intervention." This process occurred due to participation in the empowerment course, joining a social movement or a women's movement and meeting with empowering women. This was best described by one of the study participants, a writer who promotes disadvantaged women:

**Julia:** A person cannot release herself from the prison house. You cannot open your own jail. I also have a prison, and I alone was not able to open the prison for myself. Of course, I felt much more protected by women who were stronger than I was, and were in more secure places than I was, and came to my aid and contributed to my life.

The intervention process legitimized the voice, the opinion, and the emotion that were connected to the women's worlds by validating and confirming their existence. From this we can understand that contrary to what emerges from Saar's (2007) study in order to be a strong woman, it is not enough to have eloquence and charisma. In addition to some desirable qualities that allow leadership positioning, a validating space is often required to certify the voice as well as inspiring characters that serve as a model for empowerment and feminine strength.

Even if we accept the concept of power embodied in traditional domestic roles (Saar, 2007), one must understand that the sense of efficacy does not necessarily arise by itself. The research shows that the act of intervention that led to the discovery of the voice

affected the ability to express it not only in the public sphere, but also in the domestic sphere. The ability to influence and promote change among members of the family became very strong among some of the participants following the discovery of their public voice. In other words, contrary to the concept of "domestic power" that operates from bottom-up as a resource available for women's use, the study shows that the intervention to strengthen the public voice also served to strengthen the voice in the immediate environment of family and relationships.

The existence of the voice does not guarantee the sense of being able to express it. Even after women discovered their voices, freedom of expression was not taken by them for granted, but was consistently conceptualized as a privilege. The ability to express oneself freely in the face of an unfavorable environment depends on the existence of preconditions. These conditions often included the establishment of a public identity acquired through ongoing activity in a group of affiliations that share a similar social vision, such as empowerment group or women's organizations. Organizational affiliation gave some of the participants a sense of support and identity that reinforced their ability to present themselves in public and to act with a sense of influence.

While "initial silence" can be interpreted as a product of social oppression, the discovery of voice has enabled silence as a choice over a succession of different possibilities, some described as a kind of semi-imposed choice and some as an act of deliberate and strategic choice. Thus, the dichotomous perception of silence as an expression of oppression and voice as an expression of power is not necessarily accurate in describing reality. In fact, silence is not only a strategy for disadvantaged audiences (Nagar-Ron, 2009; Scott, 1985) but also tools in the hands of empowered women, such as the women in the study group. These women used it wisely in situations where they lead processes that depend on their ability to cooperate with powerful agents operating in their field of activity.

With the understanding that democracy is a necessary but insufficient condition for women's voices, the question arises as to how it is possible to strengthen the voice of women and their freedom regarding their ability to acquire a voice. Further studies can answer this question by examining the characteristics of that public spaces women encounter in their fields of activity.



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