**A Token of Repression, or an Expression of Choice?   
On Silence, Resistance and Leadership among Israeli Activists**

**Shlomit Aharoni Lir**

**Ben Gurion University**

**Phone: 972-52-3349112**

**lirshlomit@gmail.com**

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**Abstract** – in the workplace, as in public spaces, women’s silence is a noted phenomenon. In view of that, feminist literature often bestows great importance on providing a platform for the voices of women from diverse locations. Thus, women voicing themselves is often considered a powerful expression of political action; this, while silence among women is linked to intersectionality, a sense of lack of knowledge and a passive succumbing to a patriarchal feminine ideal.

The existence of this dichotomous approach raises the question of whether the social significance of silence among women is only negative and can be addressed merely through the narrow prism of oppression and exclusion, or can it be comprehended as a strategic act of resistance and choice?

This study deals with the existing lacuna in research on the meaning of silence among Israeli women who have discovered their voices and are active in the public sphere. Based on a qualitative research method that includes in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 31 public activities, the study 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. The findings show that even after the women in the research group found their voices, most of them 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 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.

# 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 1989), or we join the critiques about the ideal aspects in his description (Fraser, 1992; Benhabib, 1993), we can agree that voice – as an expression of the ability to constitute an independent standpoint – is a 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 "gender equality myth" (Herzog, 2006).

### In feminist research literature, we can identify two opposing views regarding the meaning of silence among women: the first decodes 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 with low socio-economic oppression and a history of abuse (Belenkey et al., 1986). In addition, silence is described as a state of passive dependency that occurs from submission to oppressive social norms that govern women (Lakoff, 1975; 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, including marginal 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 significance of the 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. The present study examines this issue with the aim of clarifying the existence 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.

### This 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 in various fields, including working environments.

### 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.

### Theoretical Review

The question of the ability of women to voice themselves publicly is interdisciplinary in its nature as it is related to various aspects in 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 as a metaphor for the ability to express an opinion – we are faced immediately with the question regarding the environment that allows it to be heard. As Habermas (2001) 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 of the common good (Habermas 1989). 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 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 authorization 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 an 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 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 the manner in which 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 binaryity. Yihye-Yunis (2013) elaborates on the liminal aspect between the two spaces and the manner in which 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 regimes, from an internal discourse that grows community. In such a space, narratives of trauma, shared suffering or shame become sources of strength, a sense of 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. Is the gender and social meaning of silence solely negative and to be treated merely through a narrow prism of an 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 later means a total absence from the discourse (Efrat, 2007).

In addition, as Baker (1955) points out, there is 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, opression or repression. Moreover, silence can signify fear of authority and respect for an authoritative figure in a higher socio-economic 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, speech also includes 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 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 reflect 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 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, Lakoff) argues that socialization processes that go on for many generations create an unconscious recognition of silence with femininity and voice with 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.

# Methodology

This qualitative research is based on interviews with 31 female activists in Israel. It took place on the basis of a quest to recognize the dilemmas related to voice and silence as they exist in the public sphere: the places where women found their voices and the places in which they acted in silence and refrained from expressing their views.

The research was conducted as part of a more comprehensive study that sought to examine the voices of women in online and offline public spaces. The entire study included a first round of interviews, a new media course of 16 sessions, four hours each, a second round of interviews, a few months after the end of the course, and follow-up of the products of participants in the social networks over time.

The present study is based on the first round of interviews, which yielded fascinating insights into aspects of voice and silence among women activists in Israel. It was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews, which enabled interaction with the research group, clarification of the issues discussed, and examination of the participants' perception of reality (Reinharz, 1992; Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

The analysis of the interviews was 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 (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Lieblich el al., 2010).

The criteria for research-group members was based on the condition of being active in the public sphere. The group was composed of women activists who have already found their voice; all the group members 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, volunteering in the community etc.

A. **Location**: The participants of the research group came from all over Israel. Among participants from central areas 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.

B. **Education**: The average level of education of the participants was high, and was characterized by advanced studies. It included a high school education (5), those who defined themselves as students (2), accountants (4), BA (4), MA (11), four participants who defined themselves as academics and one doctoral student.

C. **Income level**: 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.

**D. Ethnicity:** 29 of the participants are Jewish, one Muslim and one Christian. 12 They defined the land of their origin as European. 2 Set the country of origin Israel, 3 Asia, 2 Asia-Europe, 4 Africa, 1 Germany, 1 Yemen, 1 Morocco, 1 Greece-Yugoslavia, 1 Asia-Africa, and 1 Tunis.

# Findings

The first part of the analysis relates to the question how do women who are active in the public sphere gain their voices. The second part, examines the question whether silence among women necessarily signifies lack of knowledge or social marginalization. The third part, refers to the meaning of the women activists’ voices in safe spaces, while the fourth part relates to the meaning of their voices in the general public sphere. The fifth part deals with the prices of voice and silence.

### The Rebirth of the Female Voice

The selection of the research group was based on the criterion of public involvement. Hence, the study group included women with voice and leadership abilities who are active in the public sphere. Based on Gilligan's groundbreaking study (1995), which describes the loss of women's voices in adolescence, the question arose as to 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 I received demonstrate the extent to which voice among adult women is not self-explanatory. Out of thirty-one women, twenty-eight 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.

Gali, who became a facilitator of women circles, as a result of the women’s empowerment workshop she attended, describes her road to voice:

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.

In the interview, Gali went on and described how her life has changed from one extreme to the other, in a wide variety of fields, out of the understanding that she can express her opinion.

A similar description emerges from the comments of Aggie, a member of a Steering Committee in a women's movement, who is active in several social frameworks:

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 her 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.

Similarly, among two of the three women who described the presence of voice as a natural and continuous state, it became apparent, as the interview went on, that the voice was acquired later in life. This occured either through participation in a strengthening social framework or from studies that led to understanding of a woman's ability to pave her own way, and use her own voice.

Following are two parts of the interview with Iris, who is a peace activist:

I am an empowered person. I am a member of Kibbutz [kibbutz’s name]. I was always an activist. My mother, who came to Israel in 1935, is extremely feminist, long before American feminism of the sixties. This matter was completely clear to me.

... I went back to the kibbutz, where a person walks the way other pave for her, and only when I got to study did I realize that I could make my own decisions.

At the beginning of the interview, Iris describes herself as a woman who has always been strong. She mentions that being a member of a kibbutz that grew into a feminist heritage enabled her to grow up with a sense of agency and power. However, later on it becomes clear that only through the reflexive process that took place in the course of her studies did she succeed in realizing the freedom of choice that she is about to insist upon. This had led her to change the path that was designated for her by the kibbutz to be a teacher and to choose a way of life different from herself.

The findings indicate the rebirth of voice among women as a dramatic process, which in most cases occurs at a later phase of life. This factor, which is based on recurrent descriptions, reinforces Gilligan's (1995) view and the understanding that the social structures that exist in the public sphere do not support the expression of women's voices. In many cases, alternative spaces are needed; these provide a sense of security and support, and offer reflexive practices which allow the very birth of the voice.

These descriptions of silence that preceded the discovery of voice in public activity are particularly fascinating. This is because it is the silence of educated women with a career who were not aware until a relatively late stage in their lives, of their ability to take hold of their voices, to stand their ground, and to become women who influence their environment.

### Abstaining Silence

Once the existence of the voice is claimed, the question of the possibility of silence and its significance rises more intensly. This is especially true among women who are used to using their voices as part of their public activity.

Hagit, a gender researcher and social activist, describes:

I feel confident in expressing my opinions, not always expressing my opinions among people. For example, the place in which I now rent an apartment… the landlord lives next to me. I know he hates Arabs. I will not voice pro-Arab views near him.

The situation recounted by Hagit brings to mind Arendt's (2013) description of the domestic space as the realm in which the patriarch ruled over his surroundings by virtue of his power and the ownership he held. Hagit, who among other things is a peace activist, describes how she chose to avoid expressing her opinion on the Israeli-Arab conflict, in conversation with the owner of the apartment in which she lives. In other words, even as an independent and opinionated woman, Hagit silences her voice when she is faced with someone who holds power over her. [[1]](#footnote-2)

Mozayen, 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:

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, except 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.

Similarly to the silence that Hagit describes, Muzain also describes her choice of abstaining silence. She prefers not to voice her opinion in places where the expression of opinion will create disputes and lead to racist responses, including those that are expressed with horrifying looks. The looks that Muzein describes are familiar form of oppression. It is discussed in feminist literature dealing with a threatening and penetrating gaze as an act of displaying power towards women (Kaplan, 1977). The threatening gaze demonstrates how in a seemingly open and democratic space there are violent practices that take ownership of the participation in discourse through frightening gestures.

Muzain describes a situation of an international peace talks in which she participated. In her view, the basic freedom of expression: "It's me, accept me as I am" charges a price she is not interested in paying. Hence, she makes a rational choice to be cautious, and not to express her opinion in certain cases. The basic right to say what she thinks and present herself as she is, becomes difficult to implement, when the discourse includes repression expressed in racist perceptions and horrifying looks, directed at those who do not respond to the dominant views in the discussion.

Another situation of Abstaining silence which occurs in view of people in power positions, can be found in the words of Irit, whose activities in the civilian field had led her to to a great deal of involvement with military elements:

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 speaker: "You did not tell him about the affair between us ..." 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 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 a pretense of 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 a goal, and uses an abstaining silence.

In the words of Hagit, Muzien and Irit, we can find a demonstration of the conditions both Habermas (1989) and Arendt (2013) spoke about 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 exist, discursive freedom is undermined. These spaces lead to the choice of an abstaining silence as a strategic way for women with voice to deal with unequal spaces of discourse.

### Adequate Space and Voice

Parallel to the choice in maintaining silence in situations that felt unsafe and where the power structure is unequal, most women described the manner in which they make their voices heard in areas where they felt safe. This can be found for example in the words of Yemima and Shira:

I will express my opinion only where it is affective. I don’t like to waste energy; in a place where there is openness, I will express my opinion. If I see a place without wiliness to listen, I will not make an effort to express my opinion. Not because of fear or shame, but in order to save myself the energy.

I feel I'm avoiding [making myself heard] because I feel it does not promote anything. They do not want to hear .... In places where I feel comfortable, of course, I do make myself heard.

Both Yemima and Shira describe a situation that was also present in many other interviews and created a separation between spaces worthy of voice and those which were perceived as not deserving it. Yemima, who organizes and manages women's groups, said she had complete confidence in her opinion. However, she prefers not to make herself heard in spaces which are not open to listening. Similarly, Shira, who works on a variety of fields in civil society, noted that she will not express her opinion in places where she feels uncomfortable and people do not want to listen to her words.

### The Female Leader's Voice as a Privilege

In contrast to the women who chose to voice themselves in a supportive environment and in places which showed signs of listening, there were those who were willing to voice themselves in face of a resisting crowds. This willingness to take a leadership position without hesitating to voice oneself was present in the words of Merav and Iris:

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)

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)

Benjamin (2003) refers to un-silencing as a risk involving 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. In both cases, these are women who are active in organizations dealing with social reform.

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). This is also the case of the manner in which the patriarchal conceptions are embedded into the language (Almog, 2001, Cixo, 2009; Schwalter, 2009; Ginzburg, 2001). Thus, the question arises whether the public space is indeed open to all opinions, regardless of gender, and whether anyone can see herself as worthy of expressing an opinion.

Irit, who previously described how she chooses an abstaining silence in her relations with military officials, sees herself as having the privilege of making her voice heard:

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:

I participated two weeks ago in an event in which there was a panel with a facilitator, two men and one woman.... At 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 ... Afterwards, people turned to me and said, "Well done". I analyzed myself afterwards, 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. By chance it was possible to amend things at that moment… and so he did. (My emphasis)

The gender bias of the public discourse has been discussed in various studies; these studies point to the manner in which women's views are received in a different manner than those of men (Karpowitza et al., 2012, DeVault, 1999). Sophie's description of the panel she had watched illustrates not only the quantitative exclusion of women from the public discourse, which is reflected in this case in a panel with one woman participant versus three men. It also points to the gender inequality in the discourse, which is demonstrated by the fact that the facilitator does not include the only female participant in the discussion that follows the audience's questions.

Similarly to Irit, when Sophie compares her place, as someone who voices herself to other women who "see and do not comment" she describes her position as privileged. This description is meant to indicate that the place where she voices her opinion and participates in the discourse is unique, and is not reserved for everyone. Her confidence in saying things and her position in the discourse allow her not only to express her opinion in public, but also lead the panel’s facilitator to take her request into account.

However, it is precisely this description that clearly shows the bias of the entire discourse. It is not only that special confidence is required in order to participate in the public discourse, but that one’s status - acquired by years of social activism - plays a major role for the voice to be heard and taken seriously. In other words, the discourse which takes place in heterogeneous spaces that are only seemingly open to everyone’s voice equally. This difficulty is embodied on the panel's stage in the qualitative and quantitative exclusion of women from the discourse; it is also apparent among the audience, in the difficulty that Sophie describes when she sees other women who do not make a comment to the facilitator because they do not feel confident to speak publicly.

Here is the description of Fadia, a co-director of a women's movement”

**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 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 Declaration of Independence, which embodies the principle of freedom of expression as a supreme right in constitutional law and in Israeli society[[2]](#footnote-3).

Fadia refers to her ability to "say what I think," 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 from 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. As a result, it became clear that even among these women there was a practice of using abstaining silence. In addition, it became evident that even among confident women who are well-known in their field of activity, there is sometimes a sense of fear not only of speaking out but also of moving in the public sphere. This feeling was described in one case as fear of going to the bank and going on the elevator with a stranger.

### The Voice and the Silence - Between Prices and Products

While using one’s voice is described as costing a high price, the repeated descriptions show that silence also has its own price. The abstaining silence is often described as a necessity that occurs in present time, when the reaction must be immediate. It was also described as an ongoing situation in labor relations. What stands behind the choice of silence is a sense of survival in the face of circumstances that are perceived as endangering the activist’s sense of security, about her home, her workplace or the overall way in which she will be treated. In hindsight, a number of activists shared their feelings of remorse over the places in which their voice was suppressed and a choice in abstaining silence was made.

Shani describes her experiences as a recognized social movement leader in Israel:

I do not think I always feel safe. It surprised me very much, in [the name of the organization where she worked] I discovered it. I thought I had no difficulty expressing my opinions. In retrospect, I regret it. It's not something sensible. But I finally realized that if you're not real, it weakens you very much. Better to be unpopular and true than to be in a lie. Or, “lie” is extreme - or not to be yourself.... You know, it is interesting, you asked me if I was in the closet. ... Actually in [the name of the place] I knew I could not be very lesbian in the organization. Not that I have horns or that I'm external. The place where you should be representative for the sake of the organization is not recommended.

The parallel situation to that which describes the willingness to voice one’s opinion, despite the price that comes with that, is refraining from voice, by using caution through understanding the severe result of freely sharing a thought or an opinion. This phenomenon occurs at times in spaces and interactions that emphasize class differences, take-and-give relationships, hierarchical jobs, and spaces that are not open to pluralistic discourse.

Shani's description, which arrives from reflexive reflection on the places she chose to remain silent, indicates the price of the choice not to have a voice, when it is occurs over time.

Shani describes her choice to act from a position of abstaining silence in regard to her sexual identity at her workplace. The remorse she expresses marks the price of silence as embodied in the loss of power that comes from living in an existence which is not real.

The price of the choice in abstaining silence can also be inferred from Batya's words:

I am **between the worlds**. Constantly have to **hold myself back**. It's a difficult place to be in. I do not see a solution.... If I write about this an article it endangers my position. I have to play it very disciplined. There was a group that I belonged to, and I have been without a strategic group for years. In the group, I had the power to express myself. And it is a **very big** **deficiency** [that the group does not exist any more]. (My Emphases)

Batya, who is in a senior position in a public organization with a clear agenda, describes a complex situation, which emphasizes the small distance that exists sometimes between silence as a necessity and silence as a choice. On the one hand, she describes herself as "obliged" to adapt herself to the official opinion of the organization. On the other hand, she uses the phrase "play it disciplined". In other words, she describes a situation that she does not like, in which she consciously chooses to keep her mind to herself, so as not to endanger her position.

However, this decision is described as costing a price that is not simple. According to her words, not using a voice involves a constant sense of difficulty, restraint, deficiency and a sense of being between two worlds. This weakening feeling is opposite to her description of her feelings in a space that had allowed her in the past "the power to express" herself.

The price of silence, alongside the power of voice, can also be deduced from the words of Lia, a feminist social activist:

A very close friend of mine has been sexually harassed at her workplace. It took me a very long time to convince her not to resign. That it is possible to change things. I went with her line after line, discussion after discussion. He stopped the harassment and also ... appreciates her more. Not a harassment such as "Let's go to bed." He has a wife and four children, a lover in the company, and all the time sexist jokes. And what, she thought of resigning.

The silence, described by Lia as characteristic of her friend, takes place in the face of a discourse in which the hidden violence is expressed in sexist jokes uttered by the power holder in the workplace. The verbal violence, according to the description, leads to a silence that can be characterized as an isolating silence (Efrat, 2007). In other words, a silence that can reach the point of total retirement and withdrawal from all activity within the company.

The possibility of overcoming the circles of silence requires a discourse that enables the change of perspective. The efforts invested in the act of persuasion, which Lia describes, stems from the friend’s lack of belief in its ability to use her voice and influence her surroundings. The lack of confidence in the power of voice is so great that the friend is described as willing to give up her workplace, instead of claiming the right to be treated fairly.

# Discussion

The continued exclusion of women from the public sphere, the frequency of their silencing and the diminution in the value of their words have led to extensive feminist thought which examines the roots of the phenomenon (Wolf, 1992; McKinnon, 2009; Dworkin, 2005; Herzog, 2006). Thus, it is understandable to find vast feminist literature and scholarly calls for women to break the silence and make their voices heard (Irigari, 2003, Sikso, 2009, Lord, 1996).

Hence, it is not surprising that unlike the way in which voice is often perceived as a sign of agency and power among feminist thinkers, silence is described as a sign of weakness. As mentioned before, this occurs in three main ways: first, by referring to silence as characteristic of women who lack a sense of knowledge (Friedman, 2007; Belenky et al., 1986). Second, by referring to silence as a sign of women from disadvantaged groups whose language skills place them in an inferior position (Spike, 1995, Nagar-Ron, 2014). Third, by referring to silence as a form of submission to social norms and structures; this while accepting the role assigned to women as those who refrain from expressing their opinions and acting with passivity and dependence (Lakoff, 1975;Peperman, 2011; Dowling, 1981).

In contrast to these three characteristics, the research findings show that silence does not necessarily signify lack of power. This, in the following ways:

**Initial silence** - Following the findings, it is possible to speak of an initial silence, which was found among women in their twenties, thirties and forties. These women were not in a weakened positions: they were educated and career-oriented. However, they discovered their own voices at a later age.

Therefore, the findings indicate that the absence of voice does not necessarily indicate a weak or unarticulated position (Spivak, 1995, Nagar-Ron, 2014). A state of initial silence can occur among educated, articulate and successful women who live in a biased space that does not validate their voice as a tool of expressing an opinion as a natural and imminent part of life.

Without the existence of a space that allows the voice to be validated as an instrument for expressing an independent opinion, a silence which has yet to receive a proper scholarly treatment, in research dealing with the gendered aspects of the public sphere and the epistemology of knowledge. Thus, for example, it is impossible to locate the initial silence that emerged from the interviews in the categories proposed by Blancky and her colleagues in their breakthrough research (1986). In their research the category "Silence" is used to describe mostly uneducated women who felt lack of knowing. However, the initial silence revealed in this study was characterized by educated women who held a sense of knowledge.

**Abstaining Silence** - the discovery of the voice does not necessarily lead to using it in the public discourse. In most cases, women who have a voice choose not to use it in biased spaces. The use of abstaining silence has turned out to be an act of strategic choice that prevented facing undesirable and difficult situations.

The ability to use voice proved to be related to the possibilities that existed in the areas of discourse encountered by the participants of the research group. Among most of the participants, absteining silence resulted from meeting unfriendly spaces in which they were exposed to unequal and limiting structures of discourse that were described as arousing feelings of frustration and exhaustion. Participants in the research group described public spaces where sexual harassment, aggressive behavior, lack of listening, monitoring, and intimidation were frequent. Thus, in these spaces, the use of voice was often described as something that requires caution.

Thus, silence does not necessarily signify the dependency or child-like behavior that Dowling (1981) points to, or the fear of being perceived as non-feminine (Lakoff, 1992). Nor does it always point to the passive position that Peperman (2011) talks about. This silence occurs as a deliberate choice among independent women who have a voice. These women choose silent as a strategy to achieve what they want in complicated situations.

**Silence and the voice between conflictual to deliberative space** - the interpretation of the abstaining silence reinforces the importance of the discussion that deals with the conditions necessary for the existence of an inclusive discourse that allows an equal place for women in the public sphere (Lubin, 2013, Fraser, 1992; Hamer, 2011). In most cases, research group members who found themselves in spaces of conflict that were unsuited for allowing different point of views chose a strategy of avoiding speech. However, when the activists met with safe spaces in which there was willingness to listen, they reported that they had broken their silences. This finding is consistent with the distinction Benhabib (1993) makes between different kinds of public spaces.

**The rebirth of voice** - the initial silence that was revealed among the research group’s participants is consistent with descriptions of how adolescent girls adopt silence as part of socialization processes (Gilligan, 1995). The findings show that in order for the silence of mature women to come to an end, there is a need of a discursive space which enables the validation of their voices.

Most of the participants in the research group found their voices in leadership workshops and meetings with women with voice who are active in the public field. These spaces and encounters allowed the rebirth of the voice due to the validation of the possibility and the importance in the expression of an opinion. This is also the case in granting legitimacy to the feelings and thoughts connected to the worlds of the participants in the meeting.

Without the existence of a validating space, there is the possibility that there will be no recognition of the existence of voice and its value as an expression of an independent opinion; thus, there will be no sense of legitimacy that allows its expression. This situation creates the possibility that many women's voices do not receive any place in the public discourse.

**The Spiral of Voice** - The findings show how, in many cases, voice was used in alternative and safe spaces in which a sympathetic and respectful discussion took place, especially within women's groups. These spaces created what can be termed as a spiral of voice; they led to the rebirth of voice among adult women and created a supportive environment that strengthened the voice and allowed it to be heard and spread. This, in a way that contributes to more voices to be expressed. This had occurred when women who discovered their voices started to encourage other women to make their voices heard. In most cases, however, the scope of the spiral of voice remains limited and did not broke the silence that exists in the overall public sphere, with its gender bias.

Few of the participants in the research group - those who repeatedly described their position as exceptional and privileged - found the courage to express a critical opinion, in an environment described as conformist and hostile. In these cases, the expression of opinion has often been described in terms of struggle and difficulty.

Future studies can examine the ways to create safe spaces that enable female voice to exist, through validating processes that legitimize and enable reflection and reflection. In addition, research is needed on how to strengthen the civil aspects of the public space in a way that will enable other women to influence public discourse and leave their mark on the world.

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1. A position that is not uncommon, as Tzameret-Kercher et al., show in their research on income and status differences between the sexes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)