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# 'Four Mothers'

## The Womb in the Public Sphere

■ *Dafna Lemish and Inbal Barzel*

### ABSTRACT

■ The article presents a thematic analysis of newspaper coverage and in-depth interviews with activists of an anti-occupation protest movement in Israel called 'Four Mothers'. It suggests that journalists employed several gender-biased discourse strategies that framed the movement as a 'mother's voice' rather than a civil one: emphasizing the maternal, rather than the issues addressed by the movement; use of biased patterns to introduce female activists; and compartmentalization of the movement's activities. In light of the movement's significant political gains, these strategies can be interpreted in conflicting ways. One possibility explored is that playing to gender-appropriate expectations in the public sphere can serve as a subversive strategy to legitimize the infiltration of a female perspective to a national discourse on traditionally perceived male issues of war and security. ■

**Key Words** discourse, mothers, protest movements, public sphere, war, women

'Four Mothers' is a protest movement calling for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories of southern Lebanon. Israel invaded south Lebanon on 6 June 1982 in an attempt to solve security problems on its northern border. While planned as a limited operation, it escalated to a full-scale war and has culminated in a problematic occupation. The

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unresolved situation has claimed many lives: over 1200 Israeli soldiers have been killed in the region, and numerous (numbers unavailable) soldiers and guerrilla fighters and citizens have lost their lives on the other side of the border.

The Four Mothers movement was established after a tragic crash involving two military helicopters on 5 February 1997, resulting in the wasteful death of 73 soldiers on their way to assignments in southern Lebanon.

Originally, four women, all mothers of combat soldiers, residents of the vulnerable Israeli north, initiated the protest, to be joined by scores of others, men included. A year later, the movement reported on 600 activists around the country, and 15,000 supporting signatures on a protest petition (Ringel-Hoffman, *Ma'ariv*, 27 March 1998). Moreover, the term 'Four Mothers' possesses a symbolic meaning in Jewish tradition, since it represents the four biblical mothers (Sara, Lea, Rebecca and Rachel), thus serving as the emblem of 'motherhood' of the nation as a whole.

On 7 February 1997, a mother named Zabarie wrote in a letter to a weekly paper (*Ha'ir*):

Woman, mother! Why do you give them your son, so they would sacrifice him? Your flower is 18, and he is the most important thing for you in the world — more so than yourself. You won't eat because of him. You won't sleep because of him. And now, you let him go straight to hell, instead of telling him: 'My child, they die there! Don't go there!' . . . Lebanon is a monstrous altar. Tell him the truth, don't let him go so easily. Don't give them your child. He wants to live.

Motherly love and the instinctive desire to protect one's child are perceived in our society as an essential characteristic of femininity. The mythical strength assigned to motherly love seems to legitimize almost any form of action, including protest rebellion and even crime. The power conferred by motherhood and the romanticization of its calling, camouflages women's impotence as citizens. This is particularly true in a society like Israel which glorifies motherhood as a 'public role' to serve the national goals. As bearers of children, women are entrusted with the biological and social reproduction of the national collective (Berkovitch, 1997). 'The unique mission of the woman, the mission of motherhood — there is no greater mission than that in life', declared the pronounced first prime minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, in 1949, in a debate about releasing married women from compulsory military service.

These essentialist maternal qualities have been used by some theoreticians and politicians, including many feminist thinkers and activists, to explain and justify women's involvement in anti-war protest movements (Lorentzen and Turpin, 1998). The assumption inherent in these arguments is that the essence of 'woman' includes natural inflexible qualities resulting from her role (or potential role) as a mother: a mother produces life and destroying it is against her nature. A mother is used to providing care, to nourishing and nurturing, and therefore will seek cooperation, and object to violence and the exploitation of power. Universalistic notions suggest that through centuries of socialization, women have become more equipped to resolving conflicts through peaceful means rather than through competition and violence, which are more in line with masculine norms of behaviour (Galblum, 1997/8; Harris and King, 1989). However, for maternal practice to become 'a natural resource for peace politics' (Ruddick, 1989: 157), it needs to be transferred from the private lives of women, to the public sphere of politics, as Azmon (1997) so rightfully states. Indeed, this 'motherist' posture has many manifestations and was the leading argument of many of the women's peace movements of the century worldwide (York, 1998).

Although many argue over the notion of the essential peaceful nature of women (Elshtain, 1987), their involvement in peace work in many countries is well documented (Lorentzen and Turpin, 1998). Specifically, research on protest movements in Israel against war and occupation suggests that women's involvement in them is significantly higher than their proportion in the population at large, and that women also tend to establish their own movements (Chazan, 1992). Over the past decade in Israel, such movements have included 'Mothers Against Silence' (protesting against the war in Lebanon), as well as 'Women in Black', 'Shani — Women Against the Occupation', 'Women for Political Prisoners', 'Tandi — Democratic Women's Movement in Israel', 'Bat Shalom' and others (all protesting against the occupation of the Palestinian Territories).

Sasson-Levy (1995) suggests that there is a need to examine women's protest movements within the unique structure of Israeli society rather than through the overly general and universalistic essentialist approach. She lists a variety of possible reasons to explain the greater involvement of women than men in Israeli protest movements: women are socialized to investing boundless energy and time in voluntary work without expecting financial or professional rewards; they are freer emotionally and practically to criticize the military than men for whom their military

service is a pivotal mechanism upon which their identity as well as social status hinge.

The central structural explanation offered by Sasson-Levy (1995) is that the main route of formal protest through institutionalized politics is quite closed to women. In Israeli political life, women have been consistently underrepresented, ranging only between 6 and 10 percent in the Israeli Knesset (parliament) (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1997). The popular discourse explaining this underrepresentation associates it with such factors as women's socialization, the impact of the electoral system, the channels used to reach positions of power, the domination of political hierarchies by men who block women from reaching them, the militarization of Israeli society and the political strength of the ultra-orthodox religious parties who discourage women from holding public office. Political life in Israel is still perceived as being dominated by power relationships, toughness and aggression and therefore not fit for women, who are constructed as passive citizens interested in their 'natural' duties as mothers and wives (Lemish and Tidhar, 1999). Since the effective official routes are closed before women, they employ grassroots movements to express themselves and to participate in the democratic process.

A central mechanism reflecting and legitimizing the gendered separation between the public sphere of the open, rational, political world and that of the private sphere of the closed, emotional, private world is the media's portrayal of social life. Previous research on gender representation in the areas of news, public affairs and politics suggests that women in Israel are still perceived as marginal to society. They are generally underrepresented, often associated with their traditional roles as caregivers, or dependency roles as the 'wife of' or the 'daughter of', or as victims of crime and domestic violence (Ariel, 1988; Tidhar, 1988; Lemish and Tidhar, 1991; Tidhar and Lemish, 1993; Herzog, 1998). The inequality in the presentation of females and males in the media is so well entrenched that it is even evident during television election campaigns based on an official discourse of equality (Lemish and Tidhar, 1991, 1999). A number of textual strategies are commonly used to reinforce and reproduce the existing social order: the compartmentalization of women and their issues in the media; presenting female politicians as being destined first and foremost to be women; implying that the world of politics is an ugly one which constitutes a threat to femininity by placing women in a role which conflicts with their traditional role (Herzog, 1998).

Understanding the construction of femininity in the media can be facilitated by applying a frame analysis. Frames, according to Goffman (1974), offer a perspective, an organization tool, that creates meaning and suggests possible interpretations. Applying this concept to the media, Gitlin (1980: 7) defined media frames as: 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual'. Wolfsfeld (1993) elaborates on the process through which the practice of journalists depends on frames to organize an otherwise meaningless collection of facts. The struggles of social actors for access to the media and for the promotion of their frames of meaning in the coverage is greatly influenced by several factors: their production assets (such as political standing and resources); their professional resonance (or alternatively, their use of exceptional behaviour to draw attention to themselves); as well as the cultural resonance of their messages and actions (Gamson et al., 1992; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Women are at a disadvantage on all three grounds.

In an attempt to understand why women's movements and women's issues as a whole have been either ignored or displayed in news coverage, Rakow and Kranich (1991: 9) suggest that news is essentially a masculine narrative 'in which women function not as speaking objects but as signs'. Their absence from the public sphere and lack of status as authority figures legitimizes their common presentation as ordinary people bearing the meaning of 'woman'. Their presentation in the news illustrates the consequences of public events rather than their being political actors in those events. When women threaten the social order, their actions are attributed to the nature of 'woman' and its essential personality fault, their disruptive character and their inability to get along with each other. The recent growth of intimacy in news coverage, including intensified increased attention to human interest stories and personalization of political behaviours allows a growing visibility of women as news presenters, yet it does not guarantee the recognition of private sphere feminine values and perspectives as appropriate for a public sphere context (van Zoonen, 1991).

Given this framing of women's marginality in the public sphere and their relegation to the private one, the case of the Four Mothers movement is of particular interest. Here is a movement openly declaring itself as 'mothers' (rather than 'citizens'), although it has embraced interested fathers and encouraged others to join in, claiming their space in the national discourse on one of the burning issues on the public agenda — security of the northern border. How did the media portray

this movement? How did coverage of its members and their messages present the 'voice' offered by motherhood in the rational debate over the future of Israel's presence in south Lebanon? What room is the female world allowed in the masculine discourse of power and dominance? These are the questions at the heart of this analysis on the portrayal of the Four Mothers movement in the Israeli press.

### **The study**

A retrospective search of news items making overt and detailed references to Four Mothers resulted in a pool of 57 items, between February 1997 (time of the triggering accident) and April 1998 (two months following the one-year memorial and a period of public soul-searching). The news coverage included 17 news items, 16 in-depth articles and 24 personal commentaries and letters to the editors, in the three major daily papers (two popular and one quality press, 44 items in all) and from various local papers (13 in all). While the sample is clearly limited in scope and not all-inclusive (and therefore inappropriate for a systematic quantitative content analysis), it serves amply to delineate the dominant themes in the representation of Four Mothers in the public sphere.

Each item was analysed for the following: (1) the type of coverage (hard news; article; personal commentary), placement in the newspaper and salience (hard news/soft news sections; headline size; visuals; spread); (2) the main themes discussed in relation to Four Mothers (information; political opinions; issues of femininity and motherhood); (3) the nature of the discourse surrounding the phenomenon (emotional/rational; descriptive/supportive/critical; personal/structural); and (4) the main themes hinted at in the headline and sub-headline and their relationship with the item as a whole (item expanding on the headline; headline irrelevant to the item; item contradictory to the headline).

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted by one of the authors with the key leader of the group as well as with three additional central activists, concerning their perceptions of the movement's position in the general discussion over Israeli military presence in southern Lebanon and their unique position as women participants in this debate. Interviews were transcribed and analysed.

### **Analysis of newspaper coverage**

The critical analysis of the newspaper coverage highlights several recurring themes suggesting a discourse of struggle with the infiltration

of women into the public sphere through the framing of the Four Mothers movement's activities within the private sphere. The following suggests the discourse strategies through which this framing was achieved.

### *Naming and its essence*

The first and most prominent theme is related to the naming of the movement 'Four Mothers', a label used by both the journalists and the members themselves. The first article to adopt this name appeared in a local paper, following the informal gathering of the four soldiers' mothers who initiated the protest against the drafting of young men to an unchallenged war. Since the article appeared just before the Passover holiday, when according to Jewish tradition the story of the exodus of the Jewish slaves from Egypt is celebrated and the four biblical Jewish mothers are mentioned, the journalist's choice of the symbolic title of 'Four Mothers' was timely. Ben-Dor, the initiator of the movement, recalls:

We decided to adopt the name, but we didn't conceive that motherhood and femininity would serve our opponents as an opportunity to divert attention from the issue and dwell on us and on our name. We tried time and again to say that fathers and many good citizens are partners in our protest, but the exposure was mainly to us as a phenomenon. (interview, 21 July 1998)

Most of the newspaper items include a reference to this name in their titles: 'Mothers', 'What do mothers say in the days and in the nights', 'Mothers' voice', 'Four mothers and one war', 'A mother's plan', 'Ten mothers joined four mothers', 'Four mothers and a deputy minister', 'We all have mothers', 'The minister and the mothers', 'Girlfriends of soldiers join mothers', 'Mothers' war-games', 'Mothers and withdrawal plans'.

The titles' framing of this civil resistance to the war, as rooted in the dependency role of motherhood, strongly reflects the dominant theme in the articles themselves. Motherhood serves as the means of legitimizing these women, thereby validating their right to express their views and for the media practitioners to give them a voice.

As one article opens:

When their sons were drafted to the Israeli Defense Forces [IDF], it was clear to the mothers that this is what needs to be done. Four mothers . . .

wiped their tears and knew that from this time on a new way of life begins for them: elite units, a life of worries from one leave to the next, relief when destiny skips over them, and a terrible pain when it did not skip over their friends. (Shneid, *Ma'ariv*, n.d.)

'We are mothers of soldiers in combat units who are serving or are going to serve in Lebanon', one mother is quoted to have said. 'The turnabout was the helicopter disaster. We decided we had to do something. We felt that we wanted to do something to help our children' (local northern paper, May 1997). 'I bore you, no slogan could convince me to sacrifice you', stated a known female media professional, in a personal commentary (Moskuna-Lerman, *Ma'ariv*, 19 January 1998).

Motherhood was often anchored as an irrational, highly emotional voice. Interviews with activists highlighted a discourse of feelings of love and caring. In one double-spread article, a few quotes are given prominence: 'Every day there is word of another friend who died. What do you do with the feeling that you are raising a child whose every need you took care of and who now is facing an existential problem?'; 'We pray for the safety of the soldiers, we hug them and love them. The nastiest saying is "You are weakening the soldiers". How can one say something like that to a mother?'; 'In one poster we wrote: "What do we get out of Lebanon? Only children in coffins"' (Shneid, *Ma'ariv*, n.d.). Many of the articles devoted space to lengthy descriptions of mothers' emotions, fears, prayers and sense of helplessness.

Interviews with activists highlighted their mixed feelings over the choice of this frame.

It's a double edged sword . . . all along they characterized us as mothers. . . . It's true, I am guilty of being a mother, but come on, come listen to what I have to say. Leave that aside! All the time they latched onto the female thing rather than to the problem at hand. It allowed them to cling to the motherhood issues and not go in depth into the problem. It afforded them a way to escape the problem. On the other hand, it was a-political, a mothers' cry . . . it worked . . . it touched people somehow . . . in their own relationships with their mothers, on the private level. (Ben-Dor, interview, 21 July 1998)

It also became clear from the interviews that the journalists actively chose to stick to the motherly frame. When referred to the official spokesman of the movement, they refused to interview him: 'They didn't want us to send a man — only a mother, who has a son in Lebanon. That's what the "ratings" dictated' (Ben-Dor, interview, 21 July 1998).

Motherhood was such an overriding meta-perspective attached to the movement and its message, that it even overrode the possibility of the common stereotypical treatment of women in the Israeli media in their sexual role. Nowhere in the reports was there a reference to the activists' appearance, beauty or dress code, so typical of women's portrayals, including those of women politicians. The surprising absence of the sexual overtone suggests that the 'motherhood' anchor of the 'Madonna–Whore' dichotomy was the overriding frame in the coverage, leaving no breach for alternative interpretations.

### *Motherhood as a source of delegitimization*

Motherhood serves as a double-edged sword, since it is also the major source of delegitimizing the arguments put forward by the movement. Mothers were presented as egocentric, emotional, inconsiderate members of society, worrying 'only' about the welfare of their own flesh and blood, and not about the common good of society. Such treatment was mainly expressed in private letters to the editors, commentaries and quotes from others in articles, but never explicitly stated by journalists themselves. 'As a father to three sons in this tiresome country, I want to say truthfully what I think about such articles of women who "send" their son to the army. When a person does not learn to control his [*sic*] fears, he [*sic*] clings to slogans', writes a citizen in response to a commentary in support of the Four Mothers (Fromkin, *Ma'ariv*, 19 January 1998). 'The attempt to camouflage a personal egocentric worry (although understood and justified), in ideological-moral arguments is too transparent and cannot deceive us', writes another male citizen (Zaharoni, *Ma'ariv*, 23 September 1997).

The opinion that mothers lack the skills, experience and knowledge to make judgements related to security matters was often stated. 'Mothers do not understand a thing about security', states a quote in a subtitle (Glikman, *Yediot Acharonot*, 3 February 1998). 'If we were men it would have been easier', confesses one of the activists, 'the male establishment has a hard time accepting us and reacts in sentences such as "what do you understand in logistics and strategy" ' (Shneid, *Ma'ariv*, n.d.).

Interestingly enough, even the members of the movement themselves are sometimes quoted to concur with this line of argument: 'We do not pretend to be able to give advice regarding security, but we are sure that there are other options to guarding the northern border' (Glikman, *Yediot Acharonot*, 3 June 1997).

This theme is highlighted by juxtaposing the irrational, non-experienced voice of mothers with that of the rational, experienced 'men'. In covering a major demonstration, the reporter describes: 'Besides mothers of soldiers, there were also fathers, senior reserve officers, and released soldiers, who were going to try to explain that there is an alternative to the IDF's stay in Lebanon' (Glikman, *Yediot Acharonot*, 3 June 1997). Interestingly enough, women who are not mothers are not even counted among participants in this gathering, the assumption being that only mothers of soldiers are involved, and not women as concerned citizens.

Similarly, the joining of men into the movement sheds a new light on the message put forward: 'Only fathers talked in an assembly of Four Mothers', states a headline, followed later in the article by a protest quote from one of the movement's representatives. ' "I insist that there will also be time for women to talk . . . the fact that I wasn't a pilot or a fighter in the military — that doesn't mean I don't have something to say." ' Following a detailed description of the various opinions expressed by men in this gathering, the article continues:

Only toward the end of the conference, when the last of the men had had his say, did a few women approach the microphone and express their opinions. In the next conference, that's what the organizers promised, mothers and women too will be invited to join the parade of speakers. (Am-Ad, *Ha'Kibbutz*, 27 November 1997)

While this report criticizes the silencing of the women, the journalists themselves add to it through lengthy descriptions of the content of the men's speeches, and only stating that the spokeswoman for the movement 'spoke', with no reference to the content of her speech. Similarly, a different article suggests that the women initiated a debate, but the detailed explanations for withdrawal from Lebanon were reported based on the words of a male politician present at the meeting and not from the women's debate (Gavish, northern local paper, May 1997).

Not only were women described in terms of the voice of inexperience and irrelevant emotion, but attention was devoted to some of those who blamed them for betraying the national ethos by demoralizing the military and causing actual damage. A right-wing female Knesset member is quoted as saying:

The legitimacy of this case seems to me completely out of place. I don't think these women should have a monopoly or copyright over the opinions of dozen of thousands of soldiers, and speak in their name. Even if they had

asked their own children, it is reasonable to assume that they would have a different opinion. I think it is very illegitimate these days to sow demoralization among soldiers when they are doing their job faithfully. (Shneid, *Ma'ariv*, n.d.)

Similarly, another right-wing political leader argued: 'All these calls for withdrawal from Lebanon cause unimagined damage. They hurt our deterrence abilities and they have no grounding in reality. It causes the terrorists to think that they can defeat us by putting pressure on us' (Rapaport, *Yediot Acharonot*, 7 April 1998). 'They are dancing over [the spilled] blood', 'They are the Hizbollah's agents', accused others (Ringel-Hoofman, *Ma'ariv*, 27 March 1998).

The Four Mothers' political challenge is thus perceived as a betrayal of the national ethos of strength and determination against all enemies, and treachery to national goals. As is often the case with protest movement (van Zoonen, 1996), the public discourse feeds back into the movement's self-perception and serves to cultivate their own identity. One of the activists shared her internal conflict on the issue of causing damage:

I, for one, when joining the movement at the beginning, I did it in secrecy, so the children wouldn't know, because I didn't know what their reaction would be. At a certain point I was also afraid that maybe our activity here could affect events somehow, that maybe the Hizbollah . . . I thought maybe the Hizbollah want us out of there, and I thought that if they see that there is pressure here, they would attack even more forcefully so we would get out of there. So I said to myself that I am really endangering the soldiers. On the other hand, later I started understanding . . . you need to believe that what you are doing is right. (Horovitz, interview, 10 November 1998)

### *Introductory patterns*

One discursive mechanism through which Four Mothers members have been delegitimized in newspaper reports is through their presentation in dependency roles as mothers, devoid of professional titles and credentials, as has been recorded in previous research (Ariel, 1988; Lemish and Tidhar, 1991; Tidhar and Lemish, 1993). Most journalists reported on the activists by specifying their names, their place of residence (close to the Lebanese border) and the fact that they are mothers of combat soldiers. Rarely is there a reference to their profession or to their education. The reduction to their roles as mothers is in sharp contrast to the treatment of men joining the movement. Such, for example, is the following title, implying that these women need a masculine reinforcement: 'The new

reinforcement player of the “Four Mothers” movement calling for a withdrawal from Lebanon is Danny Steinberg, a computer man, who devoted his time in the last few years to studying the complication in Lebanon’ (Shachar, *Ha’kibbutz*, 17 July 1997). While ‘mothers’ is a group category, the one man joining in is an identified person with a name, profession and personal history.

The naturalness with which this seems to be an accepted norm was highlighted in one of the turning points in the movement’s development, when a woman, who happened to be, among other things, the wife of the military high-commander of the northern region of Israel, was spotted signing the Four Mothers petition for withdrawal. Prominent headlines announced that ‘Wife of . . . seen signing a petition’ (Glikman, *Yedoit Acharonot*, 7 January 1998) and a debate over the legitimacy of such an act ensued in all the news media. This exaggerated media reaction surprised the activists themselves: ‘A wife of a general both thinks and speaks — what a revelation! Look what is happening here! There is a war. People here are being killed, and *this* is what you make an issue of?’ (Ben-Dor, interview, 21 July 1998).

In a personal commentary a female academician writes:

Since R.L. and A.R. added their signature to the petition distributed by Four Mothers, the country is in a storm. Not because suddenly the arguments for withdrawal from Lebanon sound more convincing, but because the wives-of dared to express in public an opinion which seems contradictory to their husbands. . . . The surprise . . . suggests that the Israeli woman is perceived first and foremost as a wife, a mother, a daughter and not as an independent person, a citizen with her own opinions. . . . Public activities under the auspices of ‘the voice of mother’ reinforce the feeling that if there is room for women to raise their voice in the public domain, it is only because they are fulfilling a domestic mission, since they are expressing the voice of the husband or son. (Tamir, *Yedoit Acharonot*, 15 January 1998)

The newspaper reports, however, were having difficulty with presenting the woman’s perspective as independent of her husband, the military general, much in line with previous literature (Rhode, 1995). While the sensational headline called attention to this ‘outrageous’ act (signing the petition), the article in and of itself hardly touched upon her personality or opinion — it mostly dwelled on the present and past military career of the husband she dared to go against in public.

An additional aspect of this pattern is the personal nature of the typical journalist interview, approaching the activists on a first name

basis, stripping them of their titles and framing the discourse as a personal, informal exchange perceived appropriate in female discourse. This is in sharp contrast to the form of approach reported in interviews with men in relation to the movement and its activities.

### *Compartmentalization*

Analysis of the various news items suggests that there is a strategy of compartmentalization in reports on Four Mothers in local newspapers, as well as within magazine sections of the major newspapers. It is characterized with a more 'human interest' and soft gossip type journalism than the reporting of hard news of central importance to society. This discursive strategy, common in the coverage of women politicians in Israel (Herzog, 1999) as well as elsewhere (Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Norris, 1997; Sapiro, 1993), serves to frame the movement within the private sphere, and to marginalize its calling.

This tendency is highlighted by the fact that the movement finds its way to the front pages mostly on those occasions when Four Mothers react to injury or to the death of soldiers, or when a prominent male leader (or the 'wife of' one) joins their protest. This was clearly expressed in interviews with members of the movement, as one activist attested:

What happens now with the media is that the minute a soldier gets killed in Lebanon, they call us immediately and want an interview. But we don't want to be associated with a movement that wakes up only at times of bereavement . . . because we are active all the time, but that is when the media seek us out. . . . People who are against us conceptually say: 'They are mothers, and that's the way mothers feel and that's why they act like this'. That's why we often feel that we need the assistance of a military man, because it is very important to have someone that is perceived to understand what he is talking about. That's the kind of perception we have in this country. (Horovitz, interview, 10 November 1998)

Once more, women activists are denied a political voice in their own right, but gain it when they are joined by a legitimate mainstream one.

### **Displaying the womb — conflicting interpretations**

The media coverage of Four Mothers, as in the case of other social movements, can be perceived as an instrument for realizing the movement's goals (van Zoonen, 1996). It assists in mobilizing a consensus

for the ideas put forward by the activists, provides symbolic links to other political and social participants, strengthens the commitment and dedication of the members themselves and serves the process of collective identifying. At the same time, however, as has been documented in the case of other social activists, media–movement interactions are characterized by a process of limiting and restricting the group's collective identity in favour of the ideas that adhere to consensual political paradigms (van Zoonen, 1996). In this particular case, it is the framing of Four Mothers as a movement whose legitimacy derives from the private sphere.

The perspective afforded by analysing the data a year after its occurrence suggests that the issue of withdrawal from Lebanon is now salient in the public agenda, demanding the attention of politicians and attracting routine media coverage.

From a marginal movement of a few women in the northern part of the country, Four Mothers has become such an influential body that ministers and Knesset members take the trouble to meet with them and listen to their opinions. The call for a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, which until recently was perceived as defeatist, has now become the basis for organized proposals by ministers. (Ringel-Hoffman, *Ma'ariv*, 27 March 1998)

From being charged in the beginning to being 'Arafat's whores', bored women that should go 'back to the kitchen', they have moved to mainstream political life. Four Mothers has become an active catalyst, demonstrating, meeting with politicians, nagging the media. Some prominent female journalists go as far as to say that Four Mothers has become synonymous with the public debate demanding a withdrawal from Lebanon, and that media practitioners now actively seek their reactions to any event related to the issue (*Mabat Nashi*, a feminist television magazine, 13 March 1999).

How can such achievements be understood in light of what seems from the analysis presented herein to be consistent biases restricting the legitimacy of the movement? Possible answers include reference to the general weariness of the Israeli public of the war in Lebanon and the price it exacts, as well as the readiness of the political establishment to seek alternative solutions to the situation. The willingness thereby of several prominent male political leaders to jump on the bandwagon capitalizing the momentum, has certainly strengthened the movement significantly. This perspective assumes that Four Mothers has capitalized on existing changes in the political system and public opinion. However, a

complementary interpretation suggests that Four Mothers served as a catalyst stimulating the public to put pressure on sympathetic politicians to express their silenced, non-popular ideas and therefore to break the mainstream 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). We argue that the newspapers treated the phenomenon of Four Mothers within an easily acceptable frame of motherhood (private sphere), rather than the alternative threatening one of citizenship (public sphere). This form of news management allowed the incorporation of Four Mothers and the radical discourse of maternal resistance into mainstream consensual media discourse. This very process of seemingly depoliticizing women actually facilitated the voicing of a female political alternative.

What remains a debatable issue, however, is Four Mothers' contribution to the possibility of the inclusion of women's voices in what is otherwise perceived as a strictly male domain in Israeli society — issues of security and war. In her analysis of women's involvement in peace movements preceding Four Mothers, Azmon (1997) concludes that mothers' voices helped to reshape the national discourse on security and peace by focusing on society's responsibility towards its children-soldiers. They challenged the norm of avoiding criticism during wartime, and pressed for public discussion of war's goals and the possibility of its termination, as well as challenging the accepted view that women lack the experience and the knowledge to voice such criticism in the first place.

The efforts of women's movements to be included in the public discourse on issues of security and politics challenges the social order, which maintains the gendered separation between the public and the private spheres. The conflict between Israel and the Arab world has been the major formative ideological theme, from whose public discourse women have been consistently excluded. The mandatory military service in Israel, and particularly combat duty, from which women are banned, has served as an integral part of the normative definition of citizenship and has become both an avenue as well as an almost necessary condition for acquiring status and joining the political collective in Israel. Women's voices and concerns are perceived as irrelevant and illegitimate to the central debate over the security of the country and its future, since they are not active participants in combat and therefore are deemed incapable of contributing to the discourse surrounding it (Halevi, 1999). Furthermore, since the nature of women's sacrifice for the collective as child bearers is deemed much lighter than that of fighting men, they are relegated to silence (Sharoni, 1996). As a result, women are left with two options: the first is to claim their rights to equal sacrifice, i.e. to insist on

joining combat units, and the second is to assert that bearing children is of equal value and therefore entitles them to a civic voice. This latter avenue is represented by women's involvement in the peace movements (Halevi, 1999).

Two clear perspectives can be drawn from the resonance that the Four Mothers movement has had in the public discourse.

### *In search of the 'civic' voice*

The first suggests that the time is finally ripe to accept women's voice as a civic, rational voice, equal in its legitimacy and persuasive power to that of a man. This is clearly expressed in the commentary of an academic woman who moved to a political career:

Being a mother and a wife is a wonderful thing, but this position has nothing to do with the public rights women have: those are derived from their status as citizens and it has nothing to do with their marital status. It is time in the State of Israel that women's opinions will be listened to on any issue, including that of foreign affairs and security, in their own right and not through the mercy of others. The time has come for women to allow themselves to express their opinions without the need for the sponsorship of the men in their lives. (Tamir, *Yediot Acharonot*, 15 January 1998)

According to this perspective, equality for women would mean accepting their arguments as genderless citizens. Playing on their femininity and unique perspective as mothers thus defeats the grand goal of claiming equal status. This frustration is expressed by one of the founding activists:

What difference does it make if I am a mother? If what I am saying is true, why does it matter who said it? If I am a mother, does it mean that only the lower part of my body is functioning and the upper part not? Why does it connote shrieking and yelling? Being a mother is one of my functions that I am proud of, but it doesn't degenerate my brain! I am presenting the problem as a citizen. And I expect an answer. And what about the men? Are they completely disassociated from emotions? Only the rational works for them? Only the rational leads them to war? (Ben-Dor, interview, 21 July 1998)

This line of argument challenges the potential long-term contribution of Four Mothers to women's presence in the public sphere, as another feminist author suggests:

The female voice in the public debate is not necessarily beneficial to both the political issue and the women's issue. . . . Peace movements in Israel take upon themselves, in many ways, the traditional division of roles between the sexes: the boys fight, the girls pacify; the men speak in the name of global considerations, the women speak in the name of the private; the men produce violence, the women withdraw from conflict. . . . To engage in politics in the name of the 'female voice' means to fixate ourselves in 'women's roles' . . . is it women's right to express themselves in regard to security matters derived from their womb? . . . does a woman who does not have children need to be silent when we talk of war and peace? 'Worried mothers', 'terrified mothers', 'hysterical mothers', are typical expressions through which politics can continue to ignore any woman who stands in the political debate in the name of motherhood. Well, the woman is hysterical. Let us stroke her head and resume talking about important matters. She continues to scream outside? Never mind, let her yell a bit if it makes her feel better. We all have mothers, we can understand. Significant political influence is not going to grow from this, and it is very doubtful if it empowers the women as a public. (Hareven, *Ma'ariv*, 4 March 1998)

A similar perspective is suggested by Gillath's (1991) analysis of an earlier movement against the occupation of south Lebanon, 'Parents Against Silence' (dubbed by the media, 'Mothers Against Silence'), which was active from about 1983 until about 1985. This group too, according to Gillath, was perceived as one of worried mothers and not as a general anti-war movement. The activists themselves, after retiring from their specific mission, had not become involved with feminist or political organizations and did not attempt to realize their potential power beyond the limited timely goal. Political movements in the name of 'motherhood' had not, thus far, had a lasting impact on political life in Israel.

### *The legitimacy of the 'mother's' voice*

The same argument is turned upside down by other writers, presenting a rival interpretation of the role Four Mothers has been playing. It suggests that being women is indeed the source of a different kind of strength, and a different kind of logic.

The revolt, if we may call it so, is not against the military service of the children . . . but against the unwillingness of the establishment, mostly male, to listen seriously and with respect to the female calling, that is certainly coming out of a different place. Somebody said it is coming from the womb. That is a very good and respectable place to come from . . . there

is room for logic that comes from the womb, and not only for logic that comes from combat experience . . . women think differently from men, especially in issues of war and peace . . . there is a need to bring the female perspective to the process of decision making. For us, women, to be able to fight over the female perspective, we have to liberate ourselves from the stigma with which we have been living for many years, that this perspective is inferior. (Paz-Melamed, *Ma'ariv*, n.d.)

One of the activists even suggests that this perspective is superior:

I have an advantage over the man, because he says 'I have to go to the army', that machismo, going to combat units, and those fathers who educate their sons to follow in their footsteps to combat . . . to be loyal to your homeland, to your roots . . . my feminist thinking is totally different . . . I am the first one who needs to worry about this, and yell about it, and cry about it . . . I gave life, you see, life . . . because they are taking my son away from me and they are telling him go serve in the army, and serve in combat units, and maybe even forsake his life. I am the first one who has to say what she has to say. (Shpigel, interview, August 1998)

In their protest activities, women blur the distinction between the spheres. Although they act in the male-dominated military area, they bring to it values and issues which have been traditionally perceived as marginal to the discussion of foreign politics and security (Sasson-Levy, 1995). Indeed, many women who have infiltrated political life in Israel find it of value to present themselves as mothers. Motherhood provides them with the legitimacy of voicing their opinions, since they have already 'paid their traditional dues' to society. What they would otherwise not dare to voice, they are allowed to express 'as mothers'. This tactic has become an official strategy even in formal political life. Lemish and Tidhar (1999) have found, for example, that during the televised election campaign for national elections in 1996, 'women as mothers' was the dominant message across all parties. Women appeared with babies in their arms and children by their sides and as mothers who talked about their children as well as mothers who talked about children in general. In this capacity women spoke about peace, the future, education, equality, personal safety, poverty, religion, retirement, minorities, military service and more. It seemed that their roles as mothers officially provided legitimacy to their presence on the screen and to the message they were delivering.

A strong metaphor in support of this perspective comes from the application of the biblical story of Abraham who is tested by God and is willing to comply with the demand to sacrifice his beloved only son Isaac.

'When God told Abraham, "take your son, the one that you love, Isaac" — Abraham did not argue. We say that if God would have approached Sara, she would have told him "forget it, I am not sacrificing this boy". She would have not accepted the order submissively' (Becker, *Ha'aretz*, 2 January 1998). Throughout the history of the Jewish people recalled in the Bible, the father is the dominant figure and the mother's reaction is absent. Four Mothers challenged this accepted norm by bringing forth a biblical myth that touches upon a most sensitive nerve even in secular Israeli society. Evoking this frame in the journalistic coverage, through the frequent employment of the term 'sacrifice', contextualized the political dilemma in familiar moral-historical terms.

### **Conclusion: subversive playing to expectations**

The fierce debate over the two perspectives among feminist journalists, professional commentators and the public at large clearly echoes the trap proposed by essentialism. This school of thought in feminist thinking assumes inherent personality differences between men and women: women are a priori nurturers and life-givers and therefore presumed to be more inclined towards anti-violent and pacifist views. As in the intellectual debate over essentialism, and its potential role in the oppression of women, the public debate too is torn over the essentialist qualities of the 'display of the womb' in the political discussion about the withdrawal from Lebanon. While the first perspective would measure the success of the movement by the gradual shift from the emotional 'mother's voice' to the 'civic' one, the second perspective is in search of the legitimization of the 'mother's voice' in its own right.

Both perspectives, however, would agree that Four Mothers gained legitimacy 'despite' its framing as the traditional 'mother's voice'. It is with this perception that we would like to take issue and suggest a rival interpretation: it is possible that Four Mothers' achievements were the result of working within the 'rules of the game' rather than going against them. In their non-threatening, legitimized and accepted roles as concerned mothers, life-bearers and caregivers, the public was willing to lend an ear to their message and was able to sympathize with their call. Since women are assigned the 'emotional work' in society, they, rather than men, are expected and have the right to publicly express vulnerable emotions such as fear and sadness (Mazali, 1997). Through these expressions they are also reflecting men's emotions, which are prohibited in the normative world of militaristic masculinity so typical of Israeli society. Mourning, lamenting and crying are almost always the behaviours

of women, and as such, they are perceived as marginal to rational decisions and to practical lines of action. Women expressing their fear over the fate of their soldier-sons illustrate how crucial the military service is, how significant and important, a matter of life and death. A mother's anxiety and pain serve as a mirror to society's values. Public expressions of such anguish as is manifested in women's protests can therefore be seen as an extension of women's traditional role as 'mourners' rather than a revolutionary act of empowerment (Tidhar and Lemish, 1993; Lemish and Tidhar, 1999). As such, they are perceived as non-disruptive and acceptable and are allowed into the public discourse.

Others, too, have suggested that it is possible to probe deeper into possible interpretations once we get beyond the description of the traditional gender stereotypes (Sapiro, 1993). Such, for example, is Chang and Hitchon's (1997) finding that viewers seem to have a more positive attitude towards political candidates when they act in a gender-appropriate way, and Kahn and Gordon's (1997) argument that female politicians may choose to play to stereotypes. Similarly, the extreme popularity in Israel of a news anchorwoman during the Gulf War was interpreted as being non-controversial and non-threatening.

A successful female interviewer, playing by the rules expected of her: to be good looking, non-aggressive, supportive, representing the 'person on the street' rather than the sophisticated expert. Under these terms she was able to receive the full support of the public in her capacity of 'a woman who made it'. (Lemish and Tidhar, 1999)

Four Mothers' activists conformed to stereotypes: they adopted the name (and with it the frame) proposed by the media; they voiced their motherly concern; they invoked their own sons as their driving force; they talked in a form of emotional 'motherese'; they vacated the stage in favour of the men who joined them; they appointed an official spokesman, and so on. Resorting to tactics which turn women's role in the private sphere into an advantage can be even understood, in this sense, to be subversive to mainstream politics. Bearing children, their strategy suggests, is as valuable a sacrifice for the collective as bearing arms, and therefore earns the right to speak. Motherhood thus becomes a resource for a particular kind of citizenship. Furthermore, their protest is not a general ideological feminist anti-war protest, deemed completely detached from Israeli reality, but a practical, contextualized and focused one, and therefore hard to be dismissed.

The case study of Four Mothers thus raises the more general issue of the rhetoric of the female voice in the public sphere. The civic voice of

women is allowed and expressed, among other things, through the discourse of motherhood. This is one possible process of gaining authority for the otherwise silenced female experience and worldview.

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