Current motherhood in Israel:

Critical perspectives in changing institutional environment

Einat Lavee, Sylvie Fogel-Bijaoui and Orly Benjamin

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Summaries of the Main Articles

Motherhood perceptions among family social workers in social services departments

Hagit Sinai-Glazer[1] and *Einat Peled*[2]

This study examines how family social workers in Israeli social services departments perceive motherhood and mothering, in particular how various aspects of the 'good mother' myth are evident in their conceptions and how these are manifested in their encounters with their female clients who are mothers.

The research methodology was qualitative, emerging from a critical feminist perspective. In depth, semi-structured interviews were held with twenty-two Jewish social workers in ten welfare departments in Israel. The study's findings suggest that, while the participants' descriptions do not reflect all aspects of the 'good mother' myth, elements of that myth do feed into their notions of motherhood.

Encounters with the clients' mothering practices raised mixed feelings in the social workers and, while most of the participants saw a connection between their clients' mothering practices and their difficult life stories, they opted for a psycho-educational approach in their work with the mothers.

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There is only one (victim) mom: Pregnancy and birth loss and the construct of motherhood in Israel

Yifat Bitton[1]

The article offers an analysis of the construct of motherhood from the normative perspective of torts, never introduced before. Critically reviewing the structure of tortious compensation for the loss of a fetus, the article follows the means by which the construct of motherhood is articulated. Pursuant to this overview, the article aims at establishing a more diverse and profound understanding of the representation of motherhood through the vantage point of feminist analysis of the tortious right to compensation for parents who had lost their fetus due to medical malpractice. In heterosexual relations, ostensibly, the experience of losing one's fetus is gender-blind in the sense that it is shared by both the man and the woman who conceived the child, but it also exposes gender-specific traits. Pregnancy, though intrinsically shared by both parents-to-be, carries distinctive elements and legal consequences that affect the construction of the most basic concepts of motherhood, fatherhood and parenthood as distinctively different human experiences.

These differences normally go unnoticed, and once the fetus turns into a newborn, become almost irrelevant. A pregnancy ending with the tragic loss of a child, however, exposes these differences to the extent that they yield different tortious results, in a manner that allows us to reconsider the gendered construction of these basic concepts, as reflected in the law. Although pregnancy is one of the most significant and meaningful positive experiences for women who conceive, it also imposes the risk of being substantially hurtful and even injurious to them.

Current tortious compensation for people who have lost their fetus fails to acknowledge this unique burden that pregnancy imposes on women. Contrastingly, this article offers an innovative and holistic compensation scheme for these cases, whereby the interests of both the father and the

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1   Striks Law School, College of Management.

mother are protected and compensated. This scheme, although recognizing the couple's shared interest in their lost fetus, nevertheless attributes special and gender-related interests to the woman. It emphasizes the physical peculiarity of pregnancy as warranting unique female-based compensation to be designated for the woman alone.

Motherhood and reproductive technology – Disability rights perspectives

Roni Rothler[1]

The central place of motherhood in Israeli society goes far beyond private and individual spheres, and well into social and political ones. Women are perceived as having natural social and motherhood abilities, and are supposed to fulfill their motherly duties without any difficulty. Whenever hardships or complexities arise, they are cataloged as pathological.

In the case of women with disabilities, the common attitude in Israel as well as around the world, is quite the opposite. It does not support their motherhood, and often perceives disability and motherhood as contradicting terms. This is to a large extent due to negative opinions regarding the parental capacities of women with disabilities, and to the lack of social support for raising children, both for parents with and without disabilities. Due to these attitudes, women with disabilities live with contradicting messages regarding their actual or potential motherhood.

Developments in the field of disability rights propose different approaches, aiming at promoting an equality that considers the unique life experience of mothers with disabilities, and a universal approach to disabilities and motherhood, taking into consideration the hardships and discrimination occurring whenever accommodations are denied to mothers with disabilities.

Through the legal case of Ora Mor-Yosef, a woman with a severe physical disability who initiated the birth of a baby girl with no genetic connection to her, the article wishes to demonstrate the potential contribution of reproductive technology combined with legal parenthood developments, and disability studies theory, to the advancement of parenting rights and opportunities for women with disabilities. Regrettably, Ora's case did not serve as a platform for such promotion, and the article tries to pinpoint why.

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By analyzing the actions and decisions of the state, the article wishes to show that the lack of genetic connection between Ora and the baby was not the real reason, nor the only reason, that stood behind the state's position. It shows how reproductive technological developments have confronted the state with new dilemmas in the field of disability and parenthood, and forced it to act in a non-policy void, revealing skeptical opinions regarding the parenthood of people, and especially women, with disabilities.

The ideal of 'good motherhood' under changing social policies amongst mothers living in poverty

Einat Lavee[1]

The experience of motherhood as well as fidelity to what constitutes a 'good mother' are related to the ways in which social and public policies enable meeting such a standard. This article examines how institutional guidelines as well as changes in policy find expression in the daily lives of mothers living in poverty; in their understanding of the ideal of good motherhood, and in the ways in which they seek to respond to them. A literature search points out the conflict faced by mothers when they attempt to respond simultaneously to the directives of neoliberal discourse and the rhetoric surrounding motherhood. Based on in-depth interviews with 70 poor mothers providing for their families, I propose to understand how these women perceive good motherhood from concepts of an alternative morality. According to the rules of this morality, the moral component of motherhood means taking personal responsibility in a way that advances the future social adaptation of one's children. From this viewpoint, a new understanding of how neoliberal and maternal discourse shape standards of good motherhood is possible. In other words, under ideological and policy guidelines according to which the main measure of social adaptation is commitment to the workforce, we can understand the action of the two dialogues as synergistic, with neoliberal ideology permeating the maternal discourse, with the two amalgamating to form 'neoliberal motherhood', where hegemonic definitions of good motherhood together with the neoliberal call for personal responsibility intersect and shape mothers' perceptions, as well as their decision-making processes.

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Fragile autonomy: Effects of divorce on mothers' earnings under welfare policy changes

Anat Herbst-Debby[1] and *Amit Kaplan*[2]

This study focuses on the implications of divorce for mother's earnings, and how these implications are related to changes in welfare policy regarding single-parent families in Israel in the last two decades. The negative economic effects of divorce on mothers and their children have been extensively documented in previous studies, as has divorce's impact on mothers' earnings specifically. The perspective we propose in this study examines changes in mothers' earnings following divorce against the backdrop of differing welfare policies' effects on single-parent families. The study rests on a unique database created especially for our project. Specifically, we used the combined census files of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics for 1995–2008; annual administrative employment records from the National Insurance Institute and the Tax Authority; and data from the Civil Registry of Divorce. These data enabled us to compare the earnings of divorced and married mothers respectively over a period during which two configurations of Israeli welfare policy targeting single-parent families were in effect: The first configuration, in effect between 1996 and 2003, under which single mothers' autonomy was buttressed by welfare policy; and the second configuration, in effect between 2004-2008, under which the market model was reinforced. Our findings indicate that mothers' ability to increase their earnings after divorce was significantly higher between 1996 and 2003 – a period characterized by the powerful impact of welfare state mechanisms that established a certain degree of economic autonomy for poor single mothers. We also found that in both periods, while married mothers earned higher wages, divorced mothers' ability to increase their earnings was greater than that of married mothers. Moreover, the differences between married and divorced mothers were greater at a time when welfare policy enabled poor single mothers more autonomy (1996-2003), than when this autonomy was undermined (2004-2008).

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The mothering of soldiers between the private and public sphere

Orit Bershtling[1] and *Roni Strier[1]*

Intimacy in mother-son relationships is usually seen as a conflictual position, a view grounded in the psychoanalytic-oedipal discourse and common cultural images such as the "castrating" mother or the weak and non-independent son. This traditional approach identifies heteronormative masculinity with detachment and alienation from the mother and with denial of her feminine qualities. The social directive of physical and psychological separateness of the son from his mother, in the name of initiation into masculinity, is emphasized in Israeli society particularly when the son leaves home to join the military. Literature on this transition reveals the Israeli military's role in gender polarization and in reducing the influence of the mother, whose voice is silenced when confronted by this masculine world.

However, the current study, informed by 30 in-depth interviews with mothers and their adult sons who define their relationship as very close, paints a more complex picture than the masculine soldier-silenced mother dyad. Despite being commonly identified as a social site that excludes the mother, most participants describe the military as a space where precisely opposite potential of reinforcing the dyadic relationship and moderating the conflictual position of intimate mother-son relations exists.

Thus, although the military acts as a gatekeeper that encourages separateness and individuation by excluding the mother and celebrating masculine camaraderie, most participants describe a positive process of becoming closer. In their descriptions, the military becomes a legitimate space for growing involvement of the mother in her son's life. We argue that in an era of hybrid gender identities and exposure to changing discourses on the nature of masculinity, soldiers are allowed to show weakness, express neediness and become closer to their mothers, whereas mothers extends the practices of motherhood into the military space. In the process, the boundaries are blurred between the private and public sphere, between "masculine" and "childlike", and between the image of the active fighter and that of the passive woman left behind.

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Perception of Islamic motherhood among Palestinian women learning in a mosque

Masarwah Srour Afnan[1]

The article deals with the model Muslim family as reflected in a program for Palestinian Muslim women from East Jerusalem about motherhood and child rearing that was conducted in a village mosque. The program was given by a local leader, a religious woman defining herself as "Sheha". The article seeks to examine the messages and practices conveyed by the facilitator about mothering and raising children, and the way they shape the concept of motherhood.

The facilitator created a model of motherhood and child-rearing combining religious and modern concepts and practices. This model presented the facilitator as the basis for fulfilling religious commandments as a way to strengthen the modesty of the woman, her religiosity and the piety of her children. Through a combination of two seemingly contradictory models - Islamic and modern-democratic, the facilitator gave new meaning to motherhood and piety, and provided contemporary content to the image of the Muslim mother. Motherhood, according to the facilitator and the women following her, is based on faith, religiosity and modesty, and on the use of democratic practices that advance the perception of "the child at the center". By creating an overlap between mothering and pious acts of the Muslim woman / mother, the facilitator challenges the traditional model of motherhood and simultaneously fills and expands upon new meanings drawn from Western culture. Developing this approach allows her to increase women's awareness of some of the patriarchal principles and doctrines oppressing them and to criticize them.

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1   Childhood department, Arab sector. David Yellin College.

Contemporary motherhood in Palestinian society in Israel: Between Joseph's connectivity and Anthias's negotiation

Tal Meler[1]

An extensive corpus of research has taken shape over the past few years concerning female Palestinian citizens of Israel. These studies however, have not succeeded in systematically conceptualizing the manner in which changes and differences in education, employment and politics have helped shape new family patterns and establish various forms of motherhood.

Research to date underscores the changes that women experience, but in the absence of a typology for the various family patterns observed in Palestinian society in Israel, it does not consider the effects of these changes on family structure and motherhood as part of academic discourse. Moreover, even when studies do address family relations in Palestinian society in Israel, they still accord far too much significance to patriarchal culture as a key formative factor. Consequently, the family and its social actors are sketched in uniform hues.

The present qualitative study focuses on motherhood among Palestinian women by assessing the social, cultural, economic and civil contexts that shape the status and affect the manner in which such motherhood is manifested. To accord due attention to multiple identity issues in the context of locational intersectionality (gender/ status/ education/ nation/ religion), I use a variety of resources to apply the concept of *connectivity* concerning identity development in the patriarchal gender context and *translocational positionality* to refer to the constant negotiation in which mothers are engaged concerning their sense of belonging. This conceptual combination sheds light on "discernible positions of motherhood" and thus helps determine whether increased education and employment, together with other processes that these women have been undergoing over the past years, are accompanied by the growth of a wider variety of motherhood patterns alongside the more familiar ones.

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1   Zefat Academic College.

Jewish modern-orthodox single mothers by choice

Tehilla Blumenthal[1]

The current article is based on pioneering qualitative research examining the phenomenon of Modern-Orthodox Jewish Israeli women who have become single mothers by choice. It reviews and analyzes their decision-making process, their self-schema, and how they think their communities and societies perceive them.

Single motherhood by choice is expanding today in the western world as a result of the increasing tendency towards individualism, and the call for more equal opportunities for women, which in turn have often led to being single for a longer period.

Single women in their late thirties and forties struggle with the question of whether to become mothers, even without a life partner, an option which has become possible thanks to technological and medical developments.

In the case of Modern-Orthodox women there is an additional dilemma. These women are taught from an early age that motherhood is a central part of being a woman, and at the same time that the only accepted family unit consists of a mother and a father who are married according to Jewish law. A deeper examination of the phenomenon of single motherhood in the religious sector is an expression of the dialectic between the external world - the traditional values of the establishment - and the internal world that longs for personal fulfillment and emotional expression.

The women in this study describe an inner conflict between two holy beliefs - guarding the sacredness of the family they wish for and believe in, as opposed to their desire to become "a mother in Israel"- a Jewish construct that reflects the great value Jewish-Israeli society places on motherhood. In this conflict, the enormous craving for motherhood has prevailed.

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1   Private practice and independent researcher.

The findings of this research clarify this yearning for motherhood and shed light on the changes that are taking place in and around the Modern-Orthodox Jewish family unit.

This study asks whether these women are perceived as belonging even though they have not conformed to the acceptable social order and what the social effects of this increasingly popular phenomenon are likely to be.

Mothering and navigation of schooling: A comparative perspective on Russian immigrant, Palestinian, and Jewish mothers

Lauren Erdreich[1], Deborah Golden[2] and Sveta Roberman[3]

This study provides a comparative perspective on mothering, as it is played out in the encounter with schooling among middle-class mothers from three Israeli social-cultural groups – Russian immigrants, Palestinian Israelis and native-born Jews. By relating the stories of three mothers, this chapter presents how they implement "intensive mothering" by navigating their children's schooling. The comparison shows that the three women share certain ideas about proper mothering; yet their modes of handling schooling are shaped by their different and changing positions in Israeli society as well as by distinct cultural models of mothering and education.

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"She is my best friend": The ultra close mother-adult daughter relationship

Einat Keren[1] and *Ofra Mayseless[1]*

This qualitative study investigates a unique constellation of fifteen Israeli mother-adult daughter dyads that described each other as their best friend and appear to experience a distinctive 'ultra-close' relationship. The daughters' ages ranged from 30 to 47 years (M = 38), and the mothers' ages ranged from 55 to73 years (M = 62). On the basis of in-depth interviews with the dyads, four major themes were identified: (a) distinct characteristics of the ultra-close relationship, which include change from a close mother-daughter relationship in early years to a mutual friendship in adulthood, multidimensional and balanced perception of each other, family boundaries that are different from the norm, and fear of separation due to the mother's death; (b) the ultra-close relationship in contrast to other relationships; (c) intergenerational transmission of closeness across four generations of women; and (d) participants' high levels of life-satisfaction and well-being. The results were discussed in light of developmental, feminist and anthropological points of view.

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1   University of Haifa.

Mother's Day: Motherhood models in popular Israeli television series

Einat Lachover[1]

The present study analyzes models that are reflected and constructed in two popular Israeli television series, which center on the experience of motherhood. The study identifies the changing values in Israeli society regarding the institution of motherhood, whilst shedding light on the processes of construction and propagation of the dominant ideologies of motherhood in neoliberal countries.

Using critical discourse analysis, the study shows a dialectic flow in the representation of motherhood, the tendency to preserve the pre-existing notions vs. the propensity for innovation. On the one hand, there is a discernible shift in the concept of motherhood, from the ideal to an acceptance of subjective motherhood, including its limitations. On the other hand, the possibility of a new family model is advanced, but at the same time there is active preservation of the element of a traditional couple relationship, and marked prevalence of the dominant Israeli socio-cultural conception that motherhood is still the default choice of Israeli women. Finally, both series do not provide any expression of the actual reality of mothers from non-privileged groups; moreover, even their representation of the lived realities of the majority of middle-class mothers is unrealistic.

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