

INTRODUCTION

STUDYING ISRAELI SOCIETY AS A FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGIST

“Modern social anthropology is entirely grounded in fieldwork. The researcher, who lives for many months or even years among a particular society in order to decipher some sociological problem, is the main source of both ethnographic knowledge and anthropological theory. Description and theory descend into the world intertwined” (Emanuel Marx quoted in Abuhav et al. 1998: 13). This definition of social anthropology—which combines description and theory, proximity to the studied society, and the untangling of social issues—reflects the approach on which this book is based. This approach draws parallels with the feminist research approach, highlighting their shared commitment to the values of equality and social justice. Both anthropological and feminist research methods involve active social engagement to counteract and prevent instances of social injustice.

The ideology of the anthropological discipline requires openness, non-judgment, and respect for the studied society and its members. The ideological and practical aspects are derived from the perception that there is much in common among all people as human beings; at the same time, there are also aspects unique to each society and/or group. The anthropological research method is based on the concept that closeness to the studied people facilitates exposure to their perceptions, values, needs, interests, social relations, etc. This qualitative type of research may yield profound and innovative insights into the social reality being studied and sometimes even yields guidance for action to change reality. Thus, anthropological research requires personal experience in fieldwork, ongoing practice in generating insights and interpretation of material accumulated in the field and the clarification of possibilities for comparing situations, events, and societies. Anthropological fieldwork is both involved and intervening, emotionally and intellectually (Hertzog and Lev 2015).

The qualitative research methodology, integral to anthropological inquiry, considers proximity to the studied society as crucial for gaining both knowledge and a profound understanding. It enables the researcher to deeply immerse in the diverse experiences of the individuals and groups s/he studies. This research approach acknowledges the researcher’s substantial contribution to knowledge development

and underscores the value of subjective observations derived from active involvement in the lives of the studied people. As Marx (1985) asserted: “Above all, sustained fieldwork is required . . . Throughout the researcher’s work, he establishes robust relationships with the people he studies. Thus, he accompanies them and studies their thoughts and problems . . . it can be unequivocally stated that the closer the researcher aligns with the people he studies, the more he will learn about them” (139–40). Thus, the researcher is the “basic research tool and sole source of knowledge” (Hazan 1992: 31). The researcher’s choice of subjects, people, events, and situations for analysis, and the interpretations proposed, are guided by his/her personality, experiences, preferences, and perceptions. Anthropological fieldwork demands both emotional and intellectual involvement. It challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs, persistently questioning seemingly self-evident arguments. Additionally, the study of people begins with self-reflection before extending to the description and interpretation of other human beings’ social lives. This exploration emerges from the researcher’s personal feelings, experiences, respect for humanity, and empathetic understanding of others’ emotions.

Likewise, feminist research integrates personal experience, emotion, and intuition, highlighting the dominant culture’s neglect of women’s experiences and knowledge. The feminist research approach critiques knowledge and study grounded in “assumptions of objectivity, rationality, and empiricism, reflecting a male-centric perspective” (Alpert 2000: 32). Dorothy Smith (1987) challenged the division between the researcher and the subjects under study, asserting that the authority of the researcher functions on the same epistemological plane as the authority of the research subjects. Hence, as the researcher delves into the lives of women, she concurrently examines her own experiences. In support of Smith, Sandra Harding (1986) challenged the conventional empiricist notion that the observer’s social identity is inconsequential to the nature of research results. She contended further that in contrast to men as a social group, women typically select research questions aimed at averting the distortion of the human social experience. Elaborating on the connection between the qualitative research method and feminist research, Niza Yanay stated that feminist research “relies on the behavior, actions, experiences, emotions, and thoughts as experienced by the female subjects . . . most feminist research today, across its diverse streams, is grounded in qualitative methodologies. These methodologies are dedicated to the critical tradition . . . as well as to projects promoting freedom and equality” (2007: 366).

Feminist anthropologist Ruth Behar extended this perspective by underscoring the significance of acknowledging subjectivity (and self-reflexivity) in human observation as a pathway to “attaining meaningful forms of objectivity and, consequently, ‘real’ science” (1996: 6). Thus, a female anthropologist embodies at least three significant identities: gender, professional, and humanistic.

The qualitative research method is associated with feminist research, which relies on “behavior, actions, experiences, emotions and thoughts, as experienced by the

studied people” and is committed to “projects of freedom and equality” (Yanay 2007: 366). Feminist and anthropological research welcomes emotional engagement and social caring.

Margaret Mead’s (1928, 1930) work on the socialization of girls into the roles of wives and mothers, dating back to the early years of the previous century, underscored the importance of melding fieldwork with a feminist approach. This feminist-anthropological approach advocates the researcher’s proximity to the studied society, emphasizing solidarity, empathy, and an active commitment to the principles of gender equality and equality overall.

Feminist research in the Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*) was connected from its inception to the anthropological-qualitative research method. Finnish anthropologist Hilma Granqvist arrived in the village of Artas (near Bethlehem) in 1920 and remained there until 1931. Granqvist’s studies focused on women in matters of marriage, family, birth, and death, in a society that was clearly gender-segregated (Granqvist 1936).

Exactly seventeen years before Granqvist’s birth (17 July, 1890), feminist activist Sarah Azariahu was born in Latvia. She became one of the leaders of the feminist struggle for women’s rights in the Land of Israel. Azariahu’s prominent leadership was revealed in the struggle for suffrage and in the establishment of a women’s party, the Hebrew Women’s Association for Equal Rights in Palestine. Although Azariahu was not an anthropologist she documented her own life (Azaryahu 1957) as well as the progression of women’s struggles for equality, including the difficulties and achievements (Azaryahu 1949). I suggest that it is almost impossible to discuss the struggle for women’s place in politics without recognizing and appreciating the course of the struggle led by Azariahu and others and her documentation of it. Granqvist’s works on the lives of Arab women in Palestine and Azariahu’s work on women’s struggles for their rights in the Land of Israel, should serve as a significant source in feminist studies as well as in anthropological and other social and political studies.

From my perspective, a feminist anthropologist is a person actively involved in the sociopolitical dynamics of both her immediate and distant surroundings. She is aware of the social structures and networks and the inherent power systems that govern them. She aims at providing meticulous and reliable descriptions of situations and events within her research domain, engaging with them not merely for documentation but also for promoting change. A feminist anthropologist possesses a heightened sensitivity to the status of the female sex, including girls and women, and is committed to recognizing and challenging the power imbalances between genders.

Over time, I recognized my own feminist identity as being intricately connected with my anthropological research. Consequently, this book mirrors this fundamental personal and professional approach. Each chapter in this volume, in one way or another, has emerged from a blend of personal engagement and anthropological research. Being a feminist researcher and activist is integral to how I observe, perceive, and engage in my academic life.

This revelation is evident in the topics featured in this book: a discussion of marginalized anthropologists in academia and the pervasive issue of violence against Jewish and Arab women, my mother's poignant Holocaust memories, the challenges in attaining leadership roles in politics and teachers' unions, the societal implications of the welfare system and legal practices on motherhood, the bureaucratic control of female immigrants from Ethiopia, projects promoting empowerment for women and girls, and the ongoing struggles of women's organizations against pornography.

The book delves into gender and feminist issues within Israeli society from the early 1990s to the early 2020s, encompassing processes and social phenomena preceding this time frame. It includes eleven chapters previously published across diverse platforms over the past twenty-five years; these contributions have undergone varying degrees of revision. Some chapters underwent significant changes, while others received minor edits. Additionally, the collection incorporates updates detailing events and processes that have occurred since the original publication, along with insights gained from hindsight. The chapters reflect ongoing research on women and gender in Israel across diverse fields of study. They integrate theoretical analysis with documented fieldwork and personal engagement in various social, feminist projects and struggles.

The book is structured around four main themes. Part I, "Gender and Feminism from Anthropological Perspectives," underscores the intrinsic connection between anthropological and feminist research in both theory and practice. This section is comprised of three chapters. The first, "Female Anthropologists Challenging Academia from the Margins," explores the role and status of female anthropologists in Israel from the 1920s onward, examining their impact on anthropological research. The chapter highlights the primary focus of female anthropologists on matters related to women and marginalized groups. The analysis unveils that the position of women in established anthropology as it developed in universities was initially unremarkable, but it has steadily improved, especially since the 1990s. Despite the university system's marginalization of female anthropologists, they exerted significant influence on the overall progress of anthropological research, particularly in areas related to women. Many female anthropologists, shunned by the major universities, were primarily employed in colleges, research institutes, and applied anthropological projects.

The second chapter in this section of the book, "Violence Against Jewish and Arab Women in Israel: Anthropological Perspectives on Two Documentary Films," delves into two documentaries produced by female filmmakers, showcasing elements of violence against women in both Jewish and Palestinian patriarchal societies within Israel. Abeer Zeibak Haddad's documentary on "honor killing" highlights the inherent danger to the physical safety of girls and women in Arab society. Yael Katzir's film explored the struggle of Jewish women for equal religious rights to pray near the Western Wall in Jerusalem, detailing the violent assaults they endured from Jewish Orthodox men and women.

The argument posits that both Arab and Jewish women, subjected to patriarchal control, face the denial of fundamental rights. This perspective implies that, irrespective of variations in socioeconomic conditions and civil rights, a culture labeled as modern and advanced may oppress women in a manner similar to a culture perceived as traditional and conservative. Both films underscored the State's failure to guarantee women's safety and rights and highlighted women collaborating with male oppressors.

Chapter 3, "Anthropological, Feminist, and Personal Reflections on My Mother's Holocaust," draws from ongoing conversations with my mother regarding her experiences during the Holocaust, exploring her recollections and their relevance to her current life. Her narrative navigates through conflicting and ambiguous perceptions, extremes of good and evil, periods and events in the past and present, distant global locations and Israel, as well as between collectives and individuals and seemingly unrelated situations.

Expanding upon my documented responses to my mother's descriptions and implications indicates that I occasionally, openly question the authenticity of her expressed feelings and perspectives when recounting her past experiences. The self-critical discussion delves into my skeptical reactions, scrutinizing the contradictions embedded in her associations during our conversations.

Part II discusses "Gender Power Relations in Politics, Education, and Sports," again in three chapters. The first explores "Women's Political Parties in Israel: Their Unrecognized Significance and Potential," and is informed by my involvement in the establishment of two women's parties (in 1992 and 1999). Through this experience, I gained extensive knowledge about the influential role of the media in determining the fate of candidates and parties in Knesset elections. It became evident to me that the sectoral structure of Israeli politics perpetuates the marginalization of women who struggle to break into the political arena. Since the founding of the State, women's organizations revealed weakness in challenging the persistent alliance between secular governments and ultra-Orthodox parties which has steadfastly excluded women from positions of power. However, the leadership of women organizations during the pre-State struggles deserves commendation for resisting pressures from the ultra-Orthodox camp to marginalize women in political spheres.

Chapter 5, "Gender Matters in Education: Blaming Women for Government's Failure" discusses the reversal in the power structure of the education system. Although the majority of teachers are female, a significant imbalance is evident, with men holding a distinct advantage in school administrations and leadership positions within teachers' unions. My engaged involvement in women's attempts to attain leadership roles within teachers' unions has significantly enhanced my understanding of power structures and the strategies employed to sustain male dominance in educational and other organizations. At the same time, it has cultivated a deep appreciation for the efforts made by women to instigate changes in leadership within educational institutions and organizations.

Chapter 6, “Male Dominance under Threat: Machoism Confronts Female Defiance in the Gym” delves into the macho culture prevalent in fitness centers in Israel. This analysis is rooted in collaborative fieldwork conducted by Assaf Lev and me. Over the course of a year, we studied two fitness centers in the bustling metropolis of Tel Aviv and one in a suburban area. The chapter outlines the efforts of male trainers as well as gym-goers to uphold their dominance in the face of challenges from their female counterparts. The use of military symbols, physical battles, and vocal expressions emerged as strategies employed to assert male dominance within the gym environment. The diverse sociogeographic contexts of the fitness centers we examined unveiled the influence of distinct circumstances on gender dominance.

Part III in this book focuses on “Motherhood and the Israeli Welfare State.” Of the two chapters in this section, the first is entitled “Motherhood under State Control: Ideology and Reality in the Israeli Welfare State.” Drawing on more than three decades of my social and research engagement, the chapter addresses the appropriation of motherhood among disadvantaged women through placement of their children within welfare and foster care frameworks. The chapter probes the diverse theories employed to diminish the significance of motherhood, elucidating the manipulative aspects used to achieve this end.

The interests of care systems and organizational collaboration, particularly between the welfare and justice systems, are presented through detailed case studies that I observed and documented over time. These case studies serve as illustrative examples, revealing the widespread application of the discourse surrounding the “best interests of the child” in processes that inflict profound and lasting harm on both mothers and their children.

Chapter 8, “The Socialization of Immigrants from Ethiopia as Welfare Clients,” draws from fieldwork conducted between 1983 and 1984, which formed an essential component of my doctoral thesis. Throughout this period, I resided in an absorption center—a social facility designed for temporary housing for newcomers to the country—accompanied by my two-year-old son. The chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the socialization practices employed in the treatment of female immigrants from Ethiopia within the bureaucratic framework of absorption centers, casting them in the role of Israeli housewives.

The analysis reveals the concept of “female identity,” specifically an identity as the housewife and mother fostered by the absorbing organizations and their officials. This influence was particularly pronounced through the immigrants’ interactions with female welfare aides, who viewed Ethiopian immigrant women as requiring their guidance, protection, and oversight.

Unlike most studies addressing the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants as well as the absorption of North African immigrants in the 1950s, which predominantly highlighted cultural disparities between immigrants and veterans, this research offers a different approach. It demonstrates how officials, particularly in their daily inter-

actions with women, conveyed prevailing Israeli societal values and norms regarding the division of gender roles, to the immigrants.

Part IV, “Feminist Activism and Women’s Empowerment,” draws on my thirty-five years of involvement in feminist activism. The three chapters in this section were crafted with the goal of documenting the strategies employed by feminist NGOs. These chapters contribute to the documentation of feminist perceptions and struggles, while also highlighting the diverse activities that have had a role in advancing women’s empowerment.

Chapter 9, “Women’s Parliament: Politics from a Feminist Perspective,” advocates for a reconsideration of political dynamics—a call for an alternative framework to the prevailing male-aggressive culture. The Women’s Parliament commenced its activities in 1998, organizing over one hundred gatherings in approximately fifty locations. Featuring about six hundred speakers from diverse backgrounds, the parliament presented academic and social-feminist knowledge and insights. Analyzing select conferences held over its more than twenty years of activity, the chapter introduces unique interpretations of gender and social issues pertinent to Israeli society. It further elucidates how the Women’s Parliament has served as a source of inspiration for various feminist movements and has provided significant support to women engaging in the pursuit of public and political office.

Chapter 10, “Young Women’s Parliament: Bridging the Divide between Israeli Jewish and Arab High School Girls,” describes a project, initiated by the Women’s Parliament steering committee, to establish a feminist model for dialogue and mutual understanding among Israeli Jewish and Arab high school girls. The Young Women’s Parliament, which commenced in 2010 and spanned a period of thirteen years, unfolded in and around twenty Jewish and Arab towns and villages and conducted activities at both the local and national levels.

A two-year pilot preceded the initiation of the Young Women’s Parliament’s activities. This pilot was carried out in five Arab villages in the north of Israel and five Jewish towns in the center of the country. The program encompassed both within-group and between-group discussions and activities, involving nearly two hundred girls. The chapter features a report on the evaluation results, indicating that participants reported a sense of engagement, believed they had gained empowerment, developed heightened empathy towards others, acquired respect for differences, and expressed intentions to remain active in the future.

Chapter 11, “The Feminist Struggle Against Pornography in Israel,” recounts the feminist endeavors in the early 2000s to prevent the legitimization of pornography in Israel. This account is rooted in my active participation in this struggle which included the establishment of a coalition of women’s and men’s organizations, involvement in demonstrations, participation in legal hearings, and contributions to academic and journalistic writing. The chapter highlights the significant pressures wielded by franchise owners on politicians and the media to secure the allowance of pornographic material screenings.

The chapter also outlines the considerable opposition from some of the women's organizations towards the struggle and its leaders. Furthermore, it critically examines the role of the Israeli Supreme Court in the legalization of screening pornographic materials. The argument posits that the Israeli Supreme Court indirectly collaborated with the sex industry through the use of liberal discourse, thereby avoiding accountability for the harm inflicted on women.

In summary, the book explores the intricate experiences of women in Israeli society through anthropological, feminist, and personal lenses. It critically examines gender dynamics across different spheres such as academia, politics, education, and sports. Documentaries on violence against women from Jewish and Arab communities illuminate societal challenges, while personal reflections on the Holocaust evoke some guilt feelings for questioning my interviewee's (my mother's) narrative of her experiences in the Holocaust. Discussions on motherhood within the Israeli welfare state and on the integration of female immigrants from Ethiopia highlight the bureaucratic regulation of women in challenging situations. Lastly, the book delves into feminist activism, delineating the significant contribution of women's political parties and the feminist efforts to bridge divides between Palestinian and Jewish Israeli women and girls.