Women in Politics and the Politics of Women:

The Substantive Representation of Women in Israel

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The normative assumption underpinning some of the feminist arguments for the equal representation of women in national decision-making institutions is that women make a substantive difference, contributing diverse views, preferences, and interests. As a result, much attention has been given to the reciprocal relationship between descriptive and substantive representation of women. Despite many conceptual and methodological difficulties, existing literature suggests that gender affects legislators' attitudes and behavior. Nevertheless, findings are often inconclusive and even contradictory. Female legislators are found to make a substantive difference, however such difference is often contextual, and contingent on institutional, partisan and cultural factors. While this is a popular, well-studied research agenda in many western democracies, it has received little scholarly attention in Israel, and remains understudied.

This study conceptually and empirically delineates the substantive representation of women in Israel. It explores whether gender affects the way Israeli MKs look at policy questions, the issues they prioritize, and the parliamentary initiatives they promote. In order to depict a comprehensive and detailed picture of the activity of Israeli legislators I examine three central parliamentary mechanisms: legislation (at different stages), committee membership and parliamentary questions. Special attention is given to the relationship between gender and national security, which is a central element in Israeli politics. The study explores whether male and female legislators prioritize security differently, and compares the results to their performance in other policy areas. In doing so, it makes a good case study for these timely questions and therefore also contributes to the growing research on gender and security. Results show that Israeli female legislators are especially active in policy areas relating to women's affairs and children and family and are less active in policy areas relating to national security, a policy area heavily dominated by male legislators.

* The attached paper will serve as the basis for a broader discussion during the lecture.