

# United fight for a seat on the flight

ALMOST TWO weeks ago, on the plane back from Israel, I witnessed an intriguing incident between a Hasidic man and his wife about where they should sit and whether it should be together or separately. It was a fitting icon for the group of feminist academics from Britain with whom I had been on a study tour. We were still involved in an intense discussion about how to report on what we had learnt and how. We spent much of our time agonising about how the tour was organised and feeling guilty about not being able to give more in exchange for the hospitality and educational challenges offered by our hostesses. It made me realise what a complex process learning is and how difficult in an academic context for feminists to integrate public and private lives.

A group of 13 women academics from institutions in Britain had been invited on a study tour to visit women developing women's studies courses in Israeli universities. The British group was largely selected from the Women's Studies Network and included a range of disciplinary interests.

The tour was organised by members of the Israeli Women's Network. However, few of us from Britain were called on to present papers or talks in our areas. There were only two sessions in which British women contributed.



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Formal sessions were only a small part of the week long visit. We had an introductory afternoon from women involved in the Israeli Women's Network, which included not only academics but activists and politicians. We also had a day of presentations from Israeli women academics on gender and education, violence against women and women's effective exclusion from the academy. Different issues were raised from the five universities represented – the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Haifa University, Tel Aviv University, Bar Ilan and Beer Sheva universities.

One of the most exhilarating sessions was held at Haifa University

over lunch. We not only heard about the development of courses around the subject of family violence but also had talks from two Arab women. One was an Israeli Arab working with her community in Nazareth and the other was a woman representative of a group known as Al Fanar, working with Palestinian women on issues to do with family murders on grounds of family honour or shame.

Another challenging discussion was held in Jerusalem when a number of academics talked about their areas of research. One had studied changing attitudes among women to the occupied territories since the intifada. Another, a lawyer, had taken up specific cases of sex discrimination in social policy issues, such as retirement pensions. The confusion of religious law and public law over divorce and maintenance was a fascinating topic.

We got some insights first hand. We visited a kibbutz and met a group of feminists from the region of the northern Galil who were involved in trying to make changes in the lives of women living on the kibbutzim. What was particularly fascinating was the fact that sex equality had not been a central issue in the development of the kibbutz movement despite the commitment to social equality.

We also visited the main army base for women which gives basic training to all the young women newly con-

scripted. The woman in charge of the base has recently been promoted to the rank of colonel. She described her experiences in relation to the organisation of the Israeli Defence Forces, her position in relation to men and her organisation of the women's activities on the base itself. We were all struck by her relative

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youthfulness – as a mother of two children aged six and one – and her incredible range of serious responsibilities. She made light of it by inviting us to comment on the lunch that she had prepared for us. This contrast between youthfulness and responsibility was further highlighted by the accounts offered by six women officers. They told us of their work which ranged from training male soldiers in the use of arms to working on submarines to teaching new im-

migrants from Russia.

We also met with some feminists from some of the political movements. For example we joined a demonstration of "Women in Black" which is a group of women campaigning for the ending of the occupation in the territories and which comes out of the women's peace movement.

We spend some time as ordinary tourists, learning about the history and contemporary developments in Israel. We had a conventional Israeli woman tour guide and a more academic, feminist guide – a doctoral student from Oxford University who is in the process of completing a thesis comparing Israeli and Arab women. She acted as translator, interpreter, adviser and finally "mummy", despite the fact that she was almost young enough to be the daughter of many of us.

We were all invited to women's homes for Friday night dinner and a party at the home of Professor Alice Shalvi on the last night of our stay. She in fact had been largely responsible for the organisation as the key to the IWN, as an academic and as an educational campaigner.

For me, the most important lesson from this tour was the stark contrast between issues facing women in Israel and in Britain. A challenging question is the conditions under which different patterns of discrimination or oppression emerge.