The old (Israeli) boys’ club

By KESHET BACHAN

When Tzipi Livni took the stage at last week’s conference marking the launch of a plan to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Israel, the audience, predominately feminist activists, greeted her a lukewarm reception which was swiftly followed by back-row heckling.

The justice minister and former foreign minister, who also heads up the negotiating team currently involved in high-level talks with the Palestinians, was there to deliver a speech on the importance of including women in peace and security processes, but was stopped a number of times by disgruntled comments.

Feminists, it seemed, weren’t happy with Livni, who has throughout her career purposely distanced herself from women’s issues, claiming she was “man enough” for the job of prime minister.

Next in line to share her thoughts was Zehava Gal-On, head of the Meretz party, who took the stage with gusto and reminded the audience that mainstreaming gender equality in policy making is about more than just ensuring equal numbers of both sexes are present at a committee meeting.

Rather, she said, it involves substantive participation in decision making which provides women with an opportunity to influence key political processes.

The 1325 Action Plan claims that the inclusion of women in peace negotiations and in decision-making bodies, committees and policies that deal with security issues is a critical step in ensuring not only a more equal representation of the sexes in politics, but for guaranteeing these important decisions are not being made by former army generals alone.

Only last week the Israeli Knesset approved the addition of NIS 2.75 billion to the already monstrously large security budget, literally ignoring their election promises and the fact that each shekel given to security is one less shekel spent on education and health.

One can’t help but wonder whether the inclusion of more women in this decision would have produced a vastly different outcome.

Those opposed to measures that seek to legislate equal representation claim women should not be seen as a unified category, and that being a woman doesn’t automatically qualify one to be a representative of women’s issues. Looking at examples such as Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher and even the current German Chancellor Angela Merkel does raise doubts as to the ability of women to actively promote other women or bring a softer tone to politics in general.

In fact, many believe once women enter the political arena they adopt “male” traits in order to succeed, and upon reaching the top, tend to attribute their success to their own individual abilities rather than those stemming from being a woman.

However, looking at women’s entrance into other male-dominated areas, such as the business sector, has been shown to bring significant advantages to both sexes. Last week the World Economic Forum, a Geneva-based think tank, published its annual Gender Gap Index which seeks to rank countries according to levels of gender equality in four categories including health, education, politics and economics.

The Index creators claim gender equality increases a country’s and a company’s competitiveness, leading to economic prosperity and growth.

Unfortunately, over the past seven years since the Index was introduced, Israel has fallen almost 20 places, from 35th to 53rd place. This is mainly due to the gap in political participation, with Israeli women missing almost entirely from parliament and ministerial positions (ranking well below Angola, China and Georgia to name but a few).

In fact, our neighboring countries, who aren’t well known for their support of women’s rights, have taken more legislative- and policy-led actions to close gender gaps over the past half decade than Israel. In addition, Israel scored quite badly on wage equality, confirming that women’s contributions in both the political and the economic spheres were undervalued.

It seems that even in a country founded on socialist ideals, where women and men serve in the armed forces side by side, true equality is still a distant dream. When it comes to Israel’s peace and security, it’s still very much the same boys from the same old military club parading each other on the back.

The author is a girls’ empowerment and women’s rights expert with over a decade of experience as a gender equality activist and scholar. She holds an MA in Gender and Development from the London School of Economics and a BA in Government and Diplomacy from IDC in Herzliya.