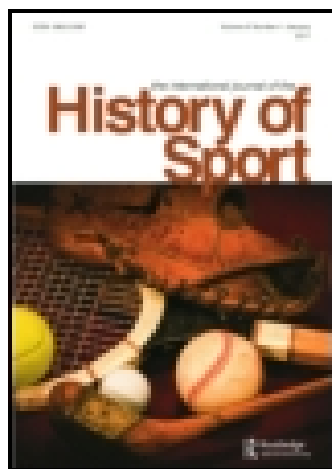


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



The International Journal of the History of Sport

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fhsp20>

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Published online: 08 Jul 2014.

To cite this article: Yair Galily & Moran Betzer-Tayar (2014): Losing is Not an Option! Women's Basketball in Israel and its Struggle for Equality (1985-2002), The International Journal of the History of Sport, DOI: [10.1080/09523367.2014.933508](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2014.933508)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2014.933508>

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Losing is Not an Option! Women's Basketball in Israel and its Struggle for Equality (1985–2002)

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The current paper sheds light on a process that has changed Israeli sport between the years 1981 and 2002. The paper traces, conceptually and historically, the multiphase nature and struggle for equality of the Israeli women's basketball team. Through examining interrelated processes, this paper illustrates that although women have gained some ground as far as visibility and awareness is concerned, it is far too early for a 'victory lap'. The rapid increase in women's participation in sports in Israel over the last decades expresses the change in the status of women in sports itself and in many other social areas, but in parallel also exposes staunch thought patterns in regard to women's and men's involvement in sports.

Keywords: Israel; sport; women's basketball; gender; equality

Introduction

The aim of the current paper is to shed light on a significant process that has changed Israeli sport between the years 1981 and 2002. The paper will trace, conceptually and historically, the multiphase nature and struggle for equality of the Israeli women's basketball team. Throughout this paper, a developmental approach, one that Elias and Dunning¹ describe as 'indispensable for advances in the study of human society', has been used to describe the process, in which women basketball was developed and flourished in the state of Israel. Elias further explains that, 'every variety of sport ... has a relative autonomy in relation not only to the individuals who play at a given time, but also to the society where it developed'.² Elias, in discussing the approach taken by himself and his collaborator Dunning, has suggested that:

Sociological enquiries into sport have the task of bringing to light aspects of sport which were not known before or which, if known, were known only vaguely. In such cases, the task is to give knowledge greater certainty. We were very conscious that knowledge about sport was knowledge about society.

And as Dunning³ puts it:

Sport is something people tend to take for granted. They may like it or dislike it but they do not usually question it or see it as posing problems, which require an explanation. In particular, they rarely ask questions concerning its development or its role in society as a whole ... It [Sociology of sport] seeks to understand the part played by sports in society and to unravel the complex social forces which have helped to shape and which are currently leading to transformations in their character.

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Thus, in seeking to comprehend such a process and to accomplish the task of better understanding women's basketball in Israel, one has to be aware of one process, state formation, which Israel as a very young state is undergoing. The state of Israel is home to a widely diverse population from many different ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds – a new society with ancient roots, it is still coalescing and developing today.⁴

At the same time, however, other processes were also intertwined with Israel's process of state formation: the processes of secularisation, population growth, urbanisation and militarisation and, most germane for present purposes, the development of sport. We would argue throughout this paper that these processes are not isolated but rather interdependent processes and, therefore, of importance when discussing the development of sport equity and equality.

Theoretical Framework: Sport, Feminism and Equality

In order to discuss the matter in hand further, a baseline definition of what we understand as feminism is required: feminism, as perceived in this study, is an approach which recognises the existence of gender inequity in society, recognises also that this situation is not fair/appropriate/ethical and, therefore, also recognises a moral imperative to strive to rectify this. In that sense, in earlier literature, discussion of gender emancipation tended to focus primarily on equality between male and female athletes, in other words 'women having the same opportunities as men to do things'.⁵ This approach reflected liberal feminists' understanding of goals for gender emancipation. The aspiration of (liberal) feminists that women be 'equal' to men had led, on the one hand, to progressive legislation,⁶ and to the promotion of women in specific countries to high-level positions, for example, within the IOC, or in a Canadian interuniversity sport organisation.⁷ However, on the other hand, these 'success stories' were relatively isolated, and many women still struggle to have access to middle and upper managerial positions, and may face more barriers to employment than their male counterparts.⁸

This concern with equality assumes girls and women are essentially the same as boys and men and thus should be provided with the same opportunities and treated in the same way.⁹ Feminist researchers and feminist advocacy organisations in sport, such as the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), have challenged the equality approach to gender, since the underlying assumption is that women are expected to assimilate the dominant masculine norms in sport.¹⁰ In response, other understandings based on gender 'equity' have been developed and espoused. For example, CAAWS adopts a definition of gender equity based on Kent and Robertson.¹¹

The principle and practice of fair allocation of resources, programs and decision-making to both women and men, and includes the redressing of identified imbalances in the benefits available.

On the whole, sport organisations consistently demonstrate that they are far from being equitable. One reason noted by Hovden¹² might be that the tightly protected white male networking circles exclude women from high-ranking roles. Furthermore, Hoerber and Frisby¹³ indicate that competing values in sport organisations have led to the marginalisation of gender equity as an organisational priority. Acker¹⁴ suggests that there is a disjuncture between the development of gender equity policies and programmes and how gender relations or socially constructed ideas of what it is to be a man or a woman are actually expressed and played out.

Gender equity has been conventionally conceived as a women's-only issue. It follows that if gender equity is a women's issue, then it is the women's responsibility to address it, rather than the responsibility of all members of an organization.¹⁵ This approach also ignores the inequities that men who are visible minorities (e.g. gay or disabled men) face in the workplace. Some researchers have suggested, therefore, that in order for gender equity to be more meaningfully supported, there must be a shift in its conceptualisation. Aitchison¹⁶ argues that post-structural feminist theory challenges 'binary divides and dualistic thinking', such as viewing gender as a women's issue, which dominates much of social theory and particularly liberal feminism. Rao, Stuart and Kelleher¹⁷ argue that gender equity should be the product of deconstructing the socio-historical gendered discourse, and that post-structural feminist theory provides an appropriate lens through which to identify the substantial changes required.

It is, therefore, proposed in this paper to move from the narrow meaning of gender equality (equal opportunities, equal representation or, in other words, women equal to men) to the broader and deeper meaning of gender equity policies, with which a sport organisation and its members might comprehend the different individualistic characteristics, needs, values and beliefs their male and female members hold, and specifically those in managerial and leadership positions.

The existence of gendered roles in leadership and management is viewed as a matter of concern by some feminists who fear legitimising the exclusion of women from some roles (for example liberal feminists), while poststructuralist feminists argue that the notion of gender allows the recognition of each actor's individual skills (including those associated with feminine leadership) which might contribute to an organisation.

Shaw et al.¹⁸ argue that the performance of men and women in managerial roles might be described as feminine or masculine; however, both sexes are able to draw on either or both of these gendered styles. For example, Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt¹⁹ characterise the distinction between gendered approaches to leadership as that between 'agentic' and 'communal':

Agentic characteristics, which are ascribed more strongly to men than women, describe primarily an assertive, controlling, and confident tendency – for example, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, daring, self-confident, and competitive. In employment setting, agentic behaviours might include speaking assertively, competing for attention, influencing others, initiating activity directed to assigned tasks, and making problem-focused suggestions.

Communal characteristics, which are ascribed more strongly to women than men, describe primarily a concern with the welfare of other people – for example, affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturing, and gentle. In employment setting, communal behaviours might include speaking tentatively, not drawing attention to oneself, accepting others' direction, supporting and soothing others, and contributing to the solution of relational and interpersonal problems.

Hoerber²⁰ found that many people have not addressed historical and systematic inequities embedded in the masculine culture of sport organisations, such as the devaluing of female athletes and women's sport, which makes it difficult for men and women to achieve equity.

The Context of Women and Sport in Israel

Feminist criticism of sport has developed in particular over the last three decades in Israel. Research published in the 1970s and 1980s revealed the differences between socialisation processes in male sport in comparison to female sport, while looking at sport as an

institution which might neutralise the power and privileged rights which are given to men rather than women.²¹

The findings of this research suggest that the trivialisation and marginalisation of female athletes are both part of the reproduction of society overall and, particularly, of male superiority. Nevertheless, even in later decades, sport researchers have continued to claim that sport, perhaps more than any other social institution, perpetuates male superiority and female inferiority. Such claims are derived from the notion of the deconstruction of biological and physiological legitimisation of male 'superiority'. Nevertheless, it is clear that significant advances have taken place during the last three decades regarding female participation in organised and competitive sport, despite the lack of progressive legislation.

According to a survey held by the Israeli Central Statistics Bureau in 1999, which dealt with 'sport activity and visits to competitions among 14-year-olds and above', one can see that the percentage of female participation in sport is almost equal to male participation and, moreover, half of the population is involved in some kind of sport activity. However, while men tend to regard sport as worthy in its own right, women tend to participate mostly for health-related reasons. There is, nonetheless, a slight tendency among men to prefer team sports, while women tend to choose more individual sports.²²

Women's sport is in many ways less developed than men's sport in Israel, and, therefore, even in comparison with women's sport in other countries, women in Israel have fewer chances of achieving successful results as athletes and have fewer opportunities to hold key positions in sport organisations. An example of this can be found in the Israeli women's national football team, which was only established in 1999. Indeed, this followed a direct instruction from European Union of Football Association, which demanded the development of a women's National Football League and by extension women's national teams from 1997 as a precondition for formulating budgets and planning men's team participation in European Cups and Championships.²³ Despite this, in 2004, the Women's National Football League was curtailed after the 11th round due to lack of finance, and the players were obliged to take their annual vacations.

Most Israeli women's successes in sport have been individual disciplines (e.g. Yael Arad, Olympic medalist in judo (1992); Anna Smashnova and Shahar Peer, Top 20 in the world in tennis at late 2000). Achievements such as participation in the Pool Round in the Women's Champions League (Maccabi Holon in football) do not attract the level of publicity and general public awareness which Israeli men's teams do, even where the latter achieve much less.²⁴

The tendency towards low female participation and achievement in sport derives in part from a lack of attention to the issue of female participation during schooling, and since budget levels are generally a by-product of the number of participants, the system itself perpetuates the situation, where lack of female participation at an early age limits the possibilities and options of integrating more women into sport later on in life.²⁵ The Chairman of the Public Committee responsible for recommendations on the criteria to be adopted in the division of income from Israel's Betting Council, Attorney Ofir Katz,²⁶ has argued:

We have accepted the standpoint claiming that, in regard to women's participation in sport, it is not enough to support it on the basis of existing players; there is a need to build a broad infrastructure for women's sport and support it on a continuous basis.

This announcement was the first landmark for the National Project for Women and Sport in Israel, which was officially instituted at the end of 2007. Women's participation in

senior competitive sport has suffered from lack of sufficient representation ever since the establishment of the State and this has led to financial gaps in the relevant budgets. Nevertheless, the situation was perpetuated by the almost complete absence of women involved within the boards of sport organisations, or any other key positions in sport institutions in Israel.

If change is to be achieved, women (and men) will need to stimulate it by bringing their voice(s), the voice(s) of the 'other', into the discourse on sport and resourcing in order to effect a more equal division of the national sport budgets. Such a move implies the reframing of hegemonic discourse that marginalises females and enhances male superiority in the context of local sport.

Equity policy has, in part, taken into account that female participation in sport should be an important target to be achieved in striving for gender equity. A need for the appointment of more women in coaching positions and increased involvement of women in communication and broadcasting has been brought up by some key actors (for example the establishment of the National Project for Women and Sport by a female within the Ministry of Sport) as has the need for increased involvement by women in decision-making processes regarding sport. It is worth acknowledging, for example, that although many broadcasters employ women in different positions and not only as 'line girls' (the on-air broadcasters who work the sports pitches during live transmission and conduct short interviews with athletes, coaches, etc. during timeouts), women are still almost completely absent from football, men basketball and sports commentaries in other high profile sports.²⁷

A tendency towards improvement in female participation can be seen in high-performance sport, as evidenced in the Israeli Olympic Delegations for the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, where, of 35 athletes, 17 were women, and in the Beijing Olympics, 2008, 22 were women athletes among the 44 athletes in the Israeli Delegation.²⁸

In order to further the discussion, one should consider the historical existence of which one can call 'the myth of gender equality' within the state of Israel. In other words, after looking in depth at the literature, it should be noted, according to Kaufman and Bar-Eli,²⁹ that throughout the history of the Hebrew *Yishuv* and the state of Israel, an ethos has been fostered of women who are completely equal to men and who carry an equal burden in all fields (including those domains which are considered to be 'male'). Women, for example, fought in the underground military organisations which preceded the establishment of the state, and today they share compulsory army service and hold positions of training and command. A prime example of this phenomenon is Golda Meir, who served as prime minister between the years 1968 and 1973.

This ethos was created mainly during the formation of the *Yishuv* at the time of the British Mandate in Palestine (1918–1948) and was part of the image of the 'New Jew' – the fighting *Sabra* (native-born Israeli) who was completely different from the subservient and self-effacing 'Ghetto Jew' (whose women held the traditional female role at home). Historical analysis, however, has shown this description to be inaccurate and rendered it a myth. For example, Bar-Eli and Spiegel³⁰ investigated patterns of stability and change relating to women in elite sport in Israel. More specifically, they attempted to explore whether there was an increase over time in the participation of Israeli women athletes in the Olympic and *Maccabiah* Games (the 'Jewish Olympic Games') in terms of frequency, percentage and proportion of participation, as well as the number and types of sports in which women participated.

In addition, the investigators attempted to follow the trends of (occupational) differentiation and segregation over time, as well as the specific patterns of women's differentiation in Israeli elite sport, as represented in the Olympic and *Maccabiah* Games.

In general, the results of Bar-Eli and Spiegel's study support the segmentation of the processes revealed in the sport context, as being quite similar to those characterised by the labour market in general, not only in Israel, but also elsewhere. More specifically, the frequency, percentage and proportion of Israeli male to female participation in both the Olympic and Maccabiah Games held between 1932 and 1996 were relatively stable (a relation of three or four men to every one woman), with a somewhat lower female participation rate for the Olympic Games. Although women were found to participate in a growing number of types of sports over time, there remained a significant level of difference between Israeli male and female participation in the Olympic and Maccabiah Games until approximately 1996.

These amazingly stable tendencies were found to have lasted even up until 1996, in a later study.³¹ Thus, the status of women in Israeli sport seems to have been quite inconsistent with the ethos of the 'New Jew'. On the contrary, it is much more consistent with worldwide trends, which are mainly a function of social forces wider than the Jewish religio-ethnic tradition affecting Israeli female lives, in general, and their athletic careers, in particular.

One of the local realities of the state of Israel is the role of the military as the 'Army of the People'. Women often are socially constrained and excluded from the mainstream due to many aspects of social public institutions, such as the army, political parties and posts, and jobs in industry or the public sector, and this is also the case in the domain of sport.

One explanation for this exclusion might be that it occurs due to the early strictures in social circles, which often start during the mandatory military service both for women and men within the different army units (for example the combat units which are more related to men's military service or administrative units which are more related to women). Army service is central to the Israeli context in a way which is perhaps difficult to appreciate in other societies.

Moreover, during army service, there is a phenomenon of army language that not everyone can comprehend, and as most combat units consist of men, women can find themselves excluded from mainstream discussions.³² Moreover, Sasson-Levi claims that women are explicitly excluded from the sub-textual conversations. Nonetheless, as men still hold the majority of decision-making positions in Israeli society, and because military service is a quasi-universal experience, the military discourse becomes the hegemonic language in the public sphere, and women once again find themselves excluded in the local reality of social circles.³³

One might claim that it is possible to decipher the dual discourses of inclusion and marginalisation by which the existing reality of gender order is preserved. As a central institution of both state and patriarchy, the army has reconstructed the Israeli male, who serves in combat roles, as the prototype of hegemonic masculinity identified with 'good citizenship'.³⁴ This construction of masculinity is used as a major criterion in shaping the differential discourse of belonging to the state.

The Struggle for Equality in Israel's Women's Basketball

The rationale for presenting the case of women's basketball in Israel as pioneers in the struggle for gender equity in Israeli sport organisations might be explained by the first women's revolt against hegemonic masculine sets of values in the context of Israeli sport. According to Dinerman,³⁵ the first revolutionary act against gender prejudice in sport in Israel was in the 1985 Maccabiah basketball games. The final women's

basketball game was to take place before the men's game at Yad Eliyahu Stadium – the premier facility in Israel.

The heads of the Maccabiah decided a day prior to the games that the women would play in a less prestigious facility away from the public and media. Israeli basketball players, together with some activists, decided not to play unless the game was to be played at the original venue. American basketball players joined the protest in solidarity with the Israelis. The women did not appear for the game and the Israeli Basketball Association (IBA) decided to punish the women by putting an end to the existence of the women's national team, thereby also punishing any future players of such a national team.

This triggered the establishment of 'Lachen', a non-profit organisation, to fight all forms of discrimination against women in basketball. 'Lachen' – which is a Hebrew acronym meaning Promoting Women's Basketball, was founded by Lea Melamed, Orna Ostfeld, Anat Draigor, Ronnit Yanitzky and Tali Birkan. They appealed in the law courts and after several discussions, the IBA retracted their decision. Since this incident, the women who form the organisation of 'Lachen' have carried the torch in the fight for equality in women's basketball and sport in general in Israel.

The Struggle

The failure of the women's team in the international arena discouraged the basketball leadership from sending the team to more international meetings, and it was not until 1968 that the women's national team was back in international competition. In the 40 years since the establishment of the state of Israel, from 1948 to 1988, the Israeli women's team had played only 51 International games (21 wins and 30 losses). A total of 39 of these games were official European games (15 wins and 24 losses), and 12 were friendly games. The men's team had played 303 games from 1952 to 1982.³⁶

Since 1968, the Israeli Women's National Basketball team had tried to qualify for the European National Basketball tournament, but until 1991 had never succeeded. In 1991, Israel was elected as the host for the Championship itself, and the 23rd European National Basketball tournament was held in the city of Tel-Aviv. Israel won only one game (against Czechoslovakia), and finished in the 8th place. The fact that the tournament was held in Tel-Aviv had a dramatic effect on the attention women's basketball received. As described by one of the players: 'I remember the fact that suddenly I became noticed, and people, other than family members, showed interest in the fact that my team-mates and I were playing basketball'.³⁷

In the 1990s, more women's clubs, such as 'Yes' Ramat Hasharon, Elizur-Ramle, Maccabi-Ra'anana and Maccabi Ramat-Chen, established themselves on the Israeli basketball scene. By the 1990s, the beginning of the struggle for equality in Israeli basketball was evident.

The dominant pressure in sports feminism is the desire for equality of opportunity with men. It is based on the belief that, although male power in sport predominates, it is not inviolable. It represents a struggle by women, and by men on their behalf, to get more of what men have always had.³⁸

In 1994, 'Lachen' representatives participated in a committee established in order to set criteria and guidelines for the allocation of money from the Council of Gambling Regulation in Israel, led by Judge Ben-Dror. As a result, the committee decided that the support for men's and women's sports should, in principle, be equal, though it even gave women a 10% preference in budget allocation, employing the use of affirmative action.³⁹

It is important to emphasise that sport, in general, and team sport, in particular, established its status among the public as a useful asset, where the people who are involved gain public appreciation and social and economic rewards. However, when one examines the sport arena closely, one soon finds that it is mostly dominated by men. This is a reflection to some degree of the traditional male conceptualisation that women are the 'weaker sex' and they are not supposed to concern themselves with physical effort or difficult sport activities.⁴⁰

Although it seems that there has been some progress in women's basketball and sport overall, and women's participation has grown due to legislation, an overview of the sports arena in Israel reveals that it remains in fundamental respects a male-dominated area in terms of management, coaching and participation at elite and non-elite levels.⁴¹ For example, women's soccer teams in Israel are almost non-existent, although men's soccer continues to receive considerable public funds. Representation of women even in basketball remains very low when compared with men, as for every female basketball player there are almost four male players.⁴²

The lack of representation of women in competitive team sports is not a matter of chance, but a product of a world view which favours the interests of men since it regards women as having little or no significant place within the world of sport and, as a consequence, women receive fewer resources to facilitate their participation. It seems that because participation in sport is seen as an activity that enhances participants' physical skills, power, initiative and striving for achievement, this is a domain which is more relevant to men than to women.⁴³

In order to make a change in the status of women's basketball in Israel, especially within local authorities and their financial decisions regarding male and female sports clubs, the Lachen organisation appealed in July 2001 to the Supreme Court of Justice in Israel against Ramat Hasharon municipality's significant preferential treatment of the men's team. The appeal focused on the discriminatory nature of the allocation of public funds and the lack of sufficient or transparent criteria for the support of the municipality for representative team sport and sport in general. For example, in Ramat Hasharon, women's sport received 20% of the total public funds allocated to sports.

While the court hearing was in progress, and due to an interim decision of the court, it was necessary that Ramat Hasharon municipality must increase the funds given to their women's basketball team. At the beginning of November 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that the guidelines the municipality followed regarding allocation of funds to sport activities in the city were invalid and that they would have to adopt a new and equal standard for the budgetary support of sport in the city. The Supreme Court also stated that in December 2002, it would review the new standards before ruling on final decisions.

However, in the local Israeli context, despite the progressive legislation and public committees that have ruled that there is no room for discrimination in sport, that equal opportunity should be created for all and that budgets should be allocated equally, the municipalities, governmental offices, sport associations and other sport organisations continued to ignore this legislation. Sport culture is, in part, a reflection of culture in general, and so the status of women in sport tends to mirror their status in society. One might thus expect the changes occurring in women's status in the labour force to be reflected in their sports.

An interim decision was handed down by the court which stated that at least one more woman should be appointed to the executive board of the IBA. Women have fought for equality in all significant walks of life for a number of years including the workplace, politics, family and sport. There are many concerns relating to the quantity and quality of

opportunities available for women in sport. Women struggle with issues related to sexism, ageism and racism. The socio-economic status of women, in general, is lower than that of men; women are paid less than their male counterparts in like occupations, which denies them equal buying power and/or access to certain activities including sport.⁴⁴

Conclusions

Discrimination against women in sport is of course not only an Israeli phenomenon. Until 2002, in the Grand Slam Tennis Tournaments, for example, women used to receive less money and were subjected to poorer conditions.⁴⁵ In Israel this situation still remains and women in sport experience discrimination at all levels and disciplines, from athletes, through budgets, to membership of management and boards.

Navratilova⁴⁶ described the issue of discrimination in sport as a modern version of the 'chicken and egg' for as long as women athletes' abilities and achievements do not improve, private sponsors or communication tools are unlikely to be developed to enlarge budgets and resources. Therefore, specific rulings that will enforce changes, paradoxically, might be a way to create a situation in which legislation would be unnecessary for gender equity.

The focus of this paper is on gender equity and sports policy and might thus be seen as focusing on an area of policy and a set of concerns which are by no means prominent and which have only recently registered on Israel's list of priorities. However, it is worth acknowledging that Israel as a state is a relatively recent construction, born into a period of ongoing conflict. Hence, sports policy and even more generic equity policies have occupied a relatively low position in terms of political salience, given the priority of national survival particularly in its early years of existence. However, notwithstanding the relatively unpromising start in relation to this policy area, a number of initiatives have developed which address key aspects of gender equity in sport. Gender inequality in sports is a well-known phenomenon with which decision-makers and participants are familiar.

Economic and societal changes in the recent decades and the entrance of many more women into the work force have led to changes in women's attitude towards sports and their potential benefits. Israeli society has begun to show 'awareness' regarding women's place in many domains including sports. Between 1993 and 1998 four government committees (Maliniak, Dekel, Ben-Dror and Levin) dealt with the subject of national sports, all of them gave a particular attention to the subject of women's sports.

The latest government commission appointed by Minister of Culture and Sports Limor Livnat examined the state of women's sports in Israel in 2013 and cited three major shortcomings: a discriminatory distribution of resources for men and women, the absence of clear-cut directions or long-range programmes for women's sports and the problematic image and perception of women and girls in sports. In addition, the commission stressed the need for appropriate representation of women in decision-making and as policy leaders, and the importance of providing increased opportunities for women in sports professions as referees, coaches, league directors, writers and journalists, editors of sports magazines, broadcasters and sports commentators.

As for the process that women's basketball in Israel underwent in recent years, through examining changes that did take place, this paper shows that although women have gained some ground as far as visibility and awareness is concerned, it is far too early for a 'victory lap'. The rapid increase in women's participation in sports in Israel over the last decades expresses the change in the status of women in sports itself and in many other social areas, but in parallel, also exposes staunch thought patterns in regard to women's and men's

involvement in sports. The different physical characteristics of men and women, and society's differing expectations influence involvement in sports and the success that women achieve in sport activities.

Notes on Contributors

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5. Hoerber, "Exploring the Gaps," 266.
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