

## **Abstract**

Starting in the early '80's of the twentieth century, the bubble of the equality of the sexes in the kibbutzim has been burst and the real truth hiding in the background has been unveiled. The purpose of this dissertation is not to burst the bubble of the new truth in the face of newer information, but to tell a story which has not yet been told by presenting the battles of the women of Ein Harod and their goal to achieve real equality. It was a war which had begun at the outset of the twentieth century. My thesis will check, for the first time using exact documentation, both detailed and general, based on the "micro"-historical method, a group of unique women, members of Ein Harod and analyze in depth their every facet, their place in the collective and their contribution to the formation of the kibbutz vitality and social setup during the first three decades of its existence. The dissertation unveils the initiative that sprang up in the kibbutz, its successes and failures, in order to prove that women in the Yishuv in general and women of Ein Harod in particular made significant contributions to the formation of the society and to the role of the society in the formation of patterns connected to the individual, to the kibbutz and to the national cause. In many respects, the women of Ein Harod, a group of unique women, navigated the gender-oriented revolution which developed on the kibbutz grounds. The gender-oriented revolution caused development in a variety of areas: compatibility between spouses, family orientation, the workplace, communal and cultural activities, security, absorption of new immigrants and delegations to Jewish targets abroad. Ein Harod became the pinnacle of the gender-oriented, Zionist revolution in every aspect connected to the place of the women within the society as a whole. My dissertation presents for the first time the gender-oriented revolution which took place in Ein Harod together with the group of feminists who brought about this revolution.

Choosing the women of Ein Harod as the subject of this study is not arbitrary. It is true that in the time frame dealt with here, the development of the Yishuv, dozens of collectives were being founded; some, like Degania and Kinneret, existed prior to the establishment of Ein Harod, and others had a much larger population. Ein Harod, however, was unique; its reputation as "the pioneer at the head of the invading forces" existed from the moment of its establishment, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1921.

Two central factors are responsible for the uniqueness of Ein Harod. The first is the fruitful meeting of the mature, experienced participants of the Second Aliya, who had been working the land for a score of years, with the new arrivals of the Third Aliya, coming straight from the communist revolutions in Russia and Eastern Europe, who were determined to fulfill the same dream in a new land. The second factor is the unique makeup of the members of Ein Harod: both men and women had varied capabilities in many realms. There were philosophers, writers, musicians, artists, educators, and more. These people were capable of forming a new culture which members of other kibbutzim later adopted.

Because of these unique factors Ein Harod developed into an influential epicenter in the social and cultural life of the Yishuv. In spite of its peripheral geographic location, it was crucial to the life of the Yishuv. Any gender-related developments there would inevitably spread beyond the boundaries of the settlement itself.

The members of Ein Harod functioned with a sense of self-importance and with a mission bent on accomplishment. It is hard to decide whether this sense determined the instincts of leadership and influence in the women members within the confines of the kibbutz, later spiraling outward to determine the place of the women in other kibbutzim and finally in the whole society of the Yishuv. It is possible that we can account for their influence simply on the basis of the dominant personalities of these women regardless of their place of settlement. In either case, if Ein Harod had the reputation of "the pioneer at the head of the invading forces", then the women considered themselves "the locomotive engine leading the rest of the train". The changes and the designs that these women wanted to institute were not meant only for the local, agricultural development, but for the whole society including all the women therein. That ambition is what made them unique and different from women in other collectives of the period. It is true that other kibbutzim also had influential women, but they could not develop a methodology for carrying forth a gender-oriented revolution. Only the women of Ein Harod were able to understand that in order to be influential, they could not remain within their own local boundaries; they had to break through the boundaries of their locality to the wider plane of the entire Yishuv. And so the social and gender-oriented processes which began in Ein Harod caused many women throughout the Yishuv to take up the banner of feminism which might otherwise have remained dormant in their consciousness without any accompanying

action. It appears that the gathering together of such a group of women—those of the Second Aliya alongside those of the Third and fourth Aliyot, educated and powerful women, in this unique setting, led to the meeting of minds which formed a fruitful environment for the absorption of feminist ideas and their application.

The study utilizes a group of between 80 and 100 women. The reason for the gap in numbers is because of the demographic changes in the kibbutz from the time of its inception until the establishment of the state three full decades later, the time span of this study. Most of the women in the initial group who instigated the changes in the various areas of kibbutz life had immigrated from Eastern Europe, products of the Second, Third, and Fourth Aliyot who had grown up in comfortable, middle-class, traditional homes, but, in addition to their Jewish upbringing, they received a broad, general education in secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. These women were influenced by the revolutionary movements in Russia and took an active part in socialistic Zionist movements like "Hovvei Zion", "Hechalutz" and "The Socialistic, Zionist Movement", so that even before they immigrated to Israel they believed in building a just society with equal rights for every citizen without consideration of class, education or wealth. In the midst of these instrumental women, there was a smaller, more dominant group of about ten women who were at the forefront of the enterprise: Yehudit Eidelman, Batya Brenner, Rivkah Danit, Nataalka Tabenkin, Atara Shturman, Sarah Yitzker, Frumka Eshed and others; the very point of the spear included Eva Tabenkin, Yocheved Bat Rachel (Tarshish) and Lilia Bassowitz. Such women as these led the other women of Ein Harod in the struggle to determine their place and participation within the confines of kibbutz life and within society as a whole..

These talented and active women, carried with them a revolutionary, Zionist, feminist consciousness, and made the main object of their concerns the "problems of the women" or "the question of the women", as they themselves termed it. The active women, especially Bassewitz, Tabenkin and Bat Rachel, but also others that they managed to carry along with them, initiated, wrote, organized and fought for equal rights and equal obligations for women in all areas: work, defense, communal activity, etc. Not all the women joined the campaign, but in time of real necessity many did participate with all the strength and energy that they could muster to bring

about changes in the status of the women. They classified this struggle a national achievement, both for the women of the entire Yishuv and for the coming generations.

The study will unveil the changes and innovations which the women of Ein Harod initiated in three central spheres: the sphere of the individual, the social, kibbutz-oriented sphere, and the national, Zionist sphere. These are not three separate entities; rather they are connected to each other, influence each other and each is influenced by the others. The historical events of the years being studied, for example the internal divisions in the kibbutz itself, the waves of Arab uprisings in the years 1929 and 1936, World War II, and other events of similar nature influenced the struggles of the women, and even determined the extent of their influence and their place in the society.

The most difficult sphere for the women of Ein Harod to initiate lasting change in was that of spouse-compatibility and the family. It is true that the pioneers formulated dramatic change during the course of the years under consideration, but these changes brought about a spurious attitude in the eyes of the kibbutz members towards the institution of the family. A sense of neglect and even contempt arose in regard to the institution of the family. Women had always been associated with the running of the home, so contempt for the home brought with it contempt for the women as well. The women did not combat the developments in the status of the family publicly other than with scattered comments, containing veiled complaints, which expressed their disappointment. They concentrated instead on other areas of combat—communal and national—where they produced dramatic change in the formation of the society and the place of the woman.

The women of the kibbutz focused the main sources of their energy on improving the status of the woman in areas of work, which was the pinnacle of the collective society, replacing traditional religious orientation. The women created a partnership along with the men in many prestigious jobs in agriculture and field work during the whole time period of this study. At the same time the women were responsible for their traditional work in which men participated less, but the fact that some third to half of the men were involved in "women's" work was unique in Ein Harod. Many difficulties arose as a result of women's persistence in agricultural branches of work; they also had to stand up to many pressures in order to continue working in the productive branches which, because of their productivity, were considered more

esteemed workplaces. By this persistence, they created a kind of gender revolution against conservative practices and influenced women in other kibbutzim, and not only the Kibbutz Hameuchad, to revolt as well.

In spite of the revolutionary tendencies of the active group of women, there were others who did not participate in these activities in the initial, founding period when the kibbutz was established. The activists, however, understood that being part and parcel of the esteemed sections of the workplace would develop the social integration of the women into other areas of kibbutz life where the women, for the most part, were passive. Together with the membership meetings dealing with labor questions, the women initiated a new concept, known today as affirmative action, a kind of negative discrimination giving women an advantage in the various realms of kibbutz life. The initiative of the women in 1930 which brought about the passing of the "thirds" law, ensuring that a third of the places in every communal committee would go to women, was a first in Ein Harod. It immediately spread to all institutions of Hakibbutz Hameuchad and afterwards to other kibbutz movements. This law brought women into every facet of communal life in Ein Harod and into the heart of the kibbutz movement. The law was not always observed in the strict sense of a third, but when vital issues were at stake the women did not hesitate to arm themselves behind the law which slowly became accepted in all public institutions in Israel and the world.

This communal breakthrough brought along with it other changes. Women like Lilia Bassowitz and Yocheved Bat Rachel edited The Ein Harod Journal and other kibbutz-movement publications containing a new and different cultural makeup. From short information-oriented publications, these journals became an important cultural treasure involved in all aspects of kibbutz society and life in the Yishuv as well. One such important cultural publication was "Women Members of the Kibbutz" (1943) relating the stories and experiences, both in the public and private spheres, of some hundred women from twenty eight kibbutzim of Hakibbutz Hameuchad. Seeing the female narrative as central, Bassewitz and Bat Rachel wanted to document the deeds of women of the past and to reveal the inner world of these female writers in order to show the women of the present that others had struggled with problems similar to those current and, in this way, to educate the coming generation of the Israeli labor movement, as explained in the introduction to the publication. The book became a

tool of gender-oriented change for women everywhere. Many perceived the book to be a pioneering experience which would put an end to the silence existing heretofore in the feminine sphere.

In national areas as well, both within the Yishuv and outside its borders, when dealing with delegations of the movement to the diaspora and the absorption of immigrants, the influence of the women is clearly recognizable. For them, gender meant that their national mission, both before World War II and after, contained unique components, characteristic of the women of Ein Harod in particular. Along with the traditional feminine tasks dealing with welfare health, nutrition and education, they worked to change the basic female identity and to develop gender consciousness in the pioneer women and the new immigrants. In addition to these two tasks, they worked to instill the basic collective values of the kibbutz movement in general and those of Ein Harod in particular.

There was a struggle of the women of Ein Harod in "The Battle of Women Members", during the period of the Arab uprising in 1936. They insisted on taking an equal part in guard duty and defense, made waves throughout the agricultural settlements and brought about important changes in the place of women in kibbutz society in general and in Ein Harod in particular. This struggle probably brought about the fact that women participated in running the defense system in the settlements and possibly in the draft arrangements to the Palmach, as well as participation in the *female assistance units* in the British Army during World War II and even in the Israeli Defense Forces after the establishment of the state. Their success in these endeavors instilled them with a sense of pride. They considered themselves the avant-garde of the feminist revolution and as a result, strived even more for similar success in social areas in the kibbutz, in the movement, and in the Yishuv.

In all their various struggles and on all the fronts they faced in their battles, the women of Ein Harod developed a new type of Zionist feminism which demanded national as well as individual changes for all the women of the kibbutz, of the Yishuv, and for the women of the following generation. These revolutionary processes brought about a number of additional revelations: firstly, the teeter-tauter law which intensifies in times of trouble and relaxes on an everyday basis. In all the revolutionary activities of the women of Ein Harod, the teeter-tauter effect is apparent. In desperate times, the women were armed and ready for any battle in order

to achieve significant goals; when the immediate goals were obtained, they reverted to their former passiveness, thus slowing down or even reversing any previous achievement. The second revelation was the number of active participants working to effect changes on the individual and national planes, those who wrote about and brought to the public eye the various gender-related issues that were relevant. Of course, behind the efforts of this active group were the silent majority of women who agreed with the goals being sought but voiced no public comment. The women of the active group worked to persuade those in the second group to let their voices be heard and to be active partners not only in the feminist struggle but also in other male-oriented areas such as security issues, communal activity and productive labor.

In light of these revelations, it is clear why progress was slow and success did not always persevere; only because the small inner group refused to give up over a period of decades was it able to obtain the significant gender achievements that it did. In spite of constant frustration, obvious from the statements of the women themselves, especially when unsuccessful with a particular project, or when unable to rally the support and help of other women, do we realize, when guided by our farsighted, historical approach, that their achievement was much greater than they themselves, or even other researchers of the kibbutz movement, understood. Nevertheless, the topic demands additional discussion which is outside the realm of this dissertation.

The findings presented in this dissertation were made possible using a research methodology based on two main disciplines. The first is gender research which, from the nineties, has concentrated on the stories of women and their unique attempts. Here it will be used in order to investigate the social structure surrounding the interplay between the sexes and the social definitions which were formulated. At the basis of this area of research is the assumption that the female story does not stand in opposition to that of the male but is complementary to it and serves to illuminate it through the use of a new focus. The second discipline is a relatively new area of study: local history, considered significant in order to gain an understanding of the entire period. Using this method, a data base is established with regard to a particular locality in order to understand general phenomena and the processes embedded in cultural and social history. In this dissertation I have made use of material found in public and personal archives which documents in a very detailed manner Ein Harod and Hakibbutz Hameuhad in general and the women who were active in these

movements in particular. I also used material found in memoirs, commemorations of all kinds, newspapers, kibbutz annals and circulations deriving from the period in question, membership records including "Divrei Poalot" and "Hachevra Bakibbutz". In addition, I drew upon novels of the period which were written by the novelists David Meltz and Shlomo Reichenstein, members of Ein Harod, who reflect the Ein Harod experience of the twenties and thirties.

Unveiling the personal and collective portrait of these influential women and their unknown story, which remained hushed up in the annals of the kibbutz itself and the kibbutz movement, has been made possible by employing newly developed methods of research and interdisciplinary integration. As opposed to accepted doctrines, this study indicates that a group of kibbutz women were already fighting for gender equality from the very beginning of the formation of the kibbutz. They did not live their lives in a socialistic bubble in which equality had already been achieved; the exact opposite was true. They began their fight in order to secure equality early on at the outset of the kibbutz movement. In consequence, the gender-oriented revolution accompanied Ein Harod from its inception. The position accepted in current research studies has been changed as a result of this study; the newly developed thesis proves that women contributed to a much greater extent to the formation of the society, to the role of the women members of the collective and to the ever-changing social experience in the kibbutz than has been acknowledged until now. The study adds yet another *layer* to feminist and gender research in the history of the settlements of the Yishuv and the Yishuv itself, and to the history of Israel in general.



