



שדרוג מינוי



קריירה

The Decline of Women in Public Leadership – and the Senior Women Leaders Building the Bench



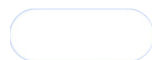
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Of all of the highest-ranking roles in the civil service, only about 35 percent have been filled by women since the state was established, according to data from the Larishona Center • After decades of progress, the past two years have seen a sharp reversal • But a group of women who reached the top refuse to back down - and they are preparing the next candidates



Yarden Ben Gal Hirshorn

February 17, 2025



רוצה לקרוא תקציר של הכתבה? 

One of the women who ran for office in the last local elections asked a well-known political campaign strategist to assist her with the campaign until victory. The

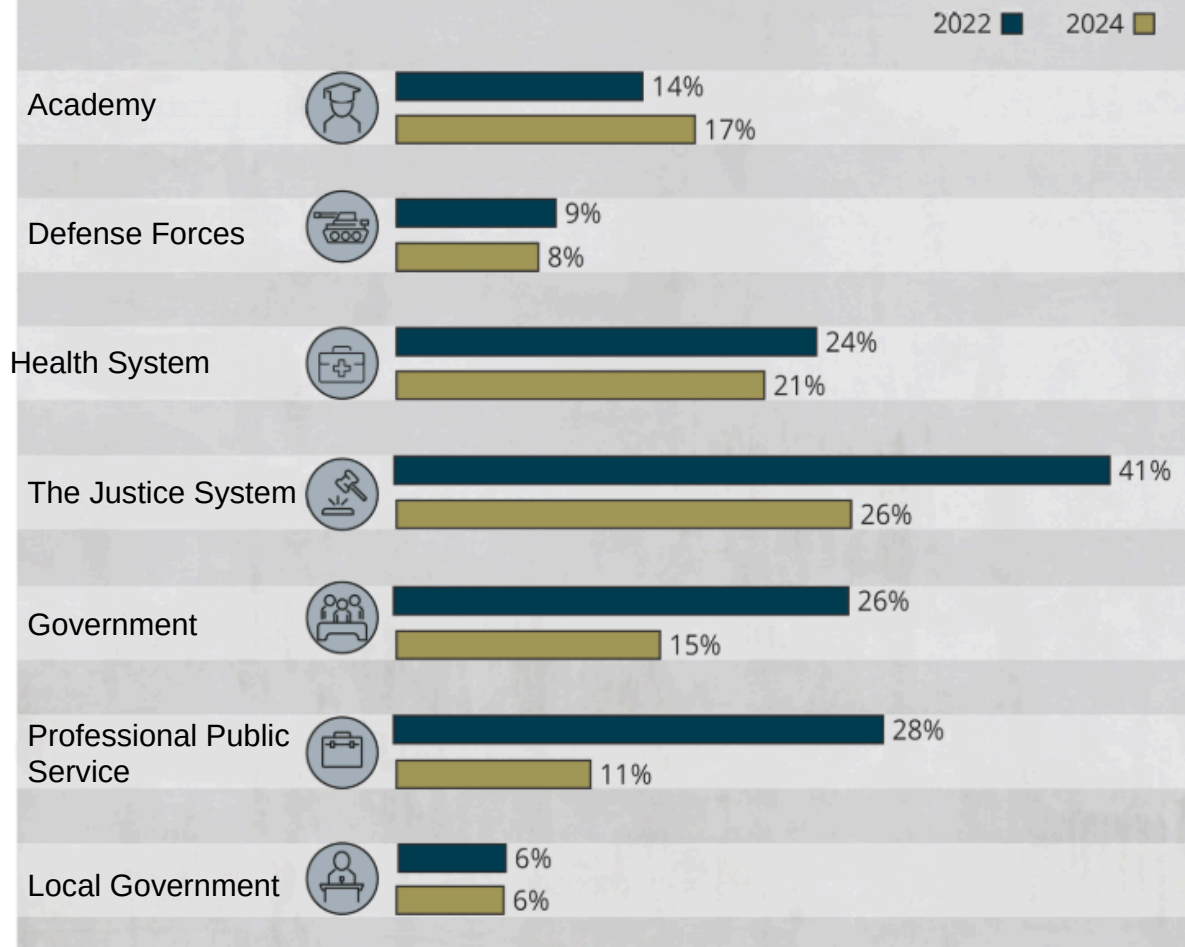
strategist, in whose defense it can be said that at least he was honest with her, replied: "Look – in all the years, no woman has ever been elected to office in this local authority. I got a similar offer from your opponent, so why should I go with you and not with him?" He realized his mistake only two months later, when she gained momentum, but by then, she decided not to work with him. She won.

This local story shows a persistent problem: historically, women have held fewer top-ranking positions, impacting their representation both in the present and the future. The pragmatic campaign strategist shows how his preconceived notions about women's chances of winning an election completely distorted his perception of reality – and cost him a client.

Yet over the past two years, after decades of progress in the percentage of women in top roles in the public leadership, a significant reversal has begun in the field of politics, in the Knesset, and in the number of women ministers – and therefore also in the positions of trust and in the professional roles. "Our challenges did not begin yesterday, but now we face the concrete challenge of a rollback in the achievements of past years, making it urgent for us to act", says Tamar Zeira, a social activist and the CEO of the Larishona Center at the Golda Meir Institute for Leadership and Society.

The Government Sets the Tone

The percentage of women in top-ranking positions, by year and category



Source: Data collected by the Larishona Center at the Golda Meir Institute for Leadership and Society

The center, whose goal is to address the the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions, has mapped all senior roles in Israel's public systems, including government ministries, local government, politics, state-owned companies, and large semi-governmental NGOs—a total of 573 positions. By the end of 2024, women held only 11 percent of these top roles—just 65 in total.



Tamar Zeira, CEO of the Larishona Center at the Golda Meir Institute for Leadership and Society (Photo: Amir Levy)

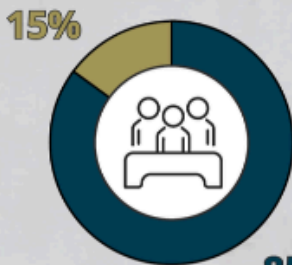
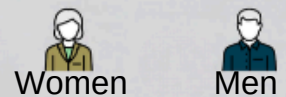
“There are plenty of women at that level who could become CEOs tomorrow morning. What stands against them is that historically, there have been no women in these roles—no networks where ‘one friend brings another.’ The competitors for these positions have, historically, been men.”

According to the center’s research, there were a few women who served in top positions until the 2000s, but since the 2000s there was a steady increase in the number of women in all areas, which peaked in 2022 with 81 women. In total, no woman has ever served in 65 percent of the top roles in Israel’s public systems.

Since then, there has been a reversal. A dramatic decline in women’s representation in top positions began in 2023—a trend that has largely continued in 2024—spanning almost all sectors: politics and government ministries, as well as governmental regulation, the justice system, and the healthcare system.

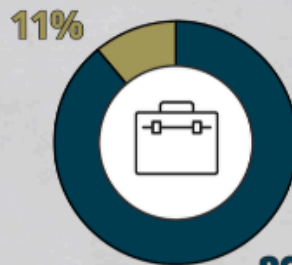
Systems Disruption

The percentage of women serving in the highest-ranking positions, by type of organization, as of 2024



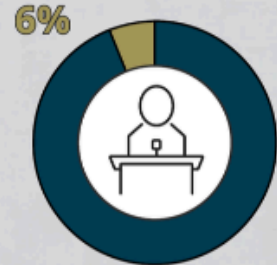
Government

Ministers in the Israeli government



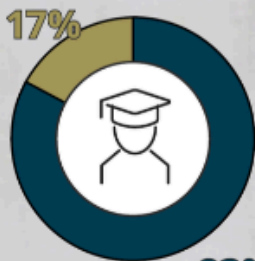
Professional Civil Service

CEOs of government ministries, heads of regulatory agencies and central government authorities, CEOs of major government companies



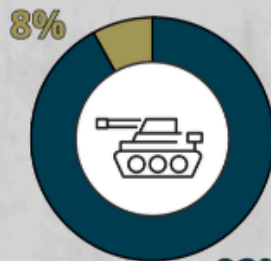
Local Government

Mayors



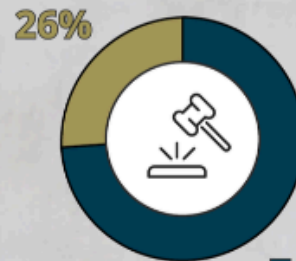
Academy

University and college presidents, deputy chairperson of the Council for Higher Education, chairperson of the Planning and Budgeting Committee



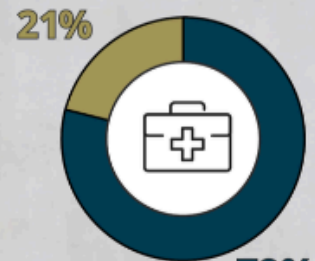
Defense

Members of the General Staff Forum in the IDF and in the Israel Police, heads of central agencies in the defense establishment



The Justice System

Supreme Court justices, District Court presidents, heads of central agencies in the justice system



The Health-Care System

Directors of hospitals and HMOs

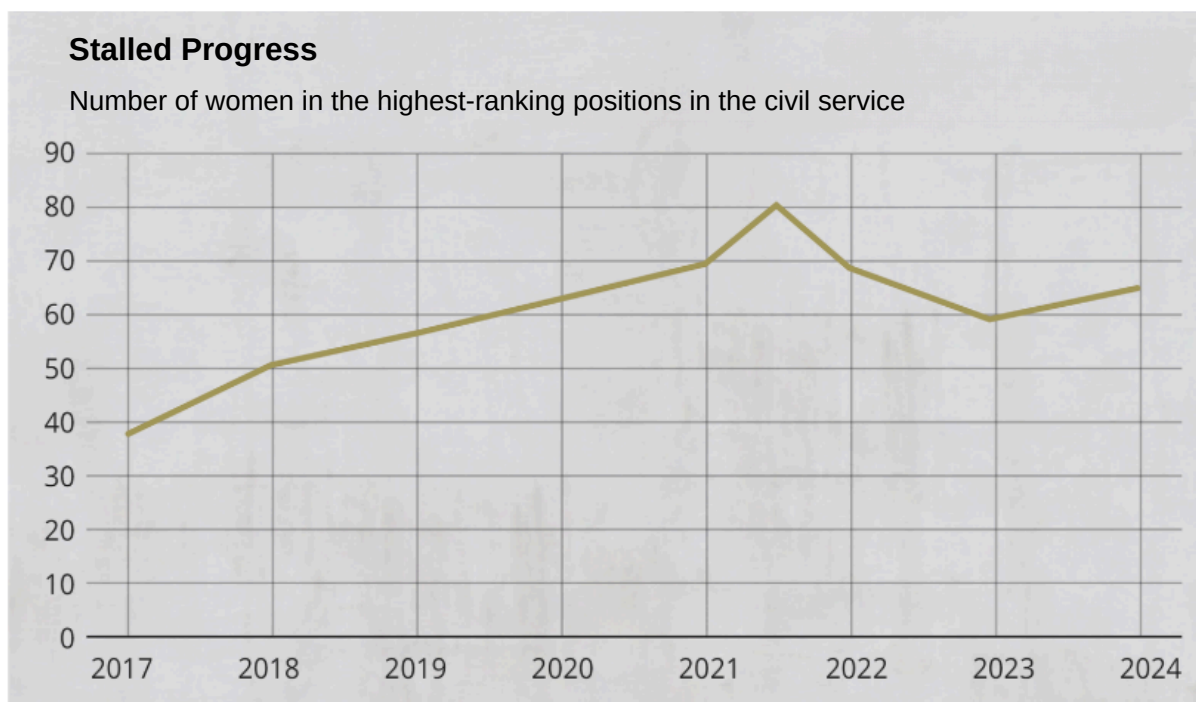
Source: Data collected by the Larishona Center at the Golda Meir Institute for Leadership and Society

Now, Zeira has set herself a goal. She formed a steering committee made up of dozens of high-ranking women who have held the highest-ranking roles: former CEOs of government ministries and current and former mayors. The steering committee's members include Keren Turner-Eyal, former CEO of the Ministry of Finance; Tair Revivo-Ifergan, former CEO of the Ministry of Labor; Dalit Stauber, former CEO of the Ministry of Education; Dafna Ravid-Rabinovich, mayor of Shoham; Liat Shochat, mayor of Or Yehuda; and Rotem Yadlin, head of the Gezer Regional Council.

They have one goal: to identify the women serving in the second- and third-highest positions, 'women who could occupy the Number One position as early as tomorrow morning,' says Zeira, and mentor them until they get there. This includes reaching out to the women directly, persuading them to run for office, meeting with them to discuss challenges and doubts—and even speaking with their spouses to prepare them for the impact of the position on the home. In the current situation, they know it will take time—a lot of time.

High Price, Low Chances

This initiative did not emerge from a vacuum. Zeira was among the founders of Forum 31, whose goal was to double the number of women mayors in Israel in the local elections. Indeed, after the increase in the percentage of women elected to office in the 2018 elections, the **number** rose further following the most recent elections. Practically speaking, this was what mitigated the decline in the total number of women in top positions, as a record number of women—16—were elected to mayoral positions in local authorities, and for the first time, four women were appointed to the 15 director-general positions in the large cities. One member of Forum 31, who ran for head of the Eshkol Regional Council thanks to that organization, was Tamar Kedem Siman Tov, who was murdered along with her family members at Kibbutz Nir Oz on October 7.



Source: Data collected by the Larishona Center at the Golda Meir Institute for Leadership and Society

“There is a clear correlation in government between attitudes toward women and appointments to high-ranking positions,” says Naama Schultz, a former CEO of the Prime Minister’s Office, now CEO of Bonim Mehadash and a member of Larishona’s steering committee. “If a minister believes that women have no right to run for the Knesset, then naturally, he won’t be concerned about the absence of women in other public sector positions. Who’s at the top matters tremendously. The attitude of the person in command filters down—if they prioritize advancing women, women are promoted. If they see it as unimportant, or even believe it’s important that women not advance, then they won’t.”



*Naama Schultz, former director-general of the Prime Minister's Office and CEO of Bonim Mehadash
(Photo: Elad Gutman)*

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But, Schultz says, looking for someone to blame is not a strategy. “If we want more women in these roles, it’s also our responsibility—to ‘fill the ammunition clips,’” she says. “We need to ensure that for every open position, there are enough qualified women, that we actively put forward their names and propose them instead of just being frustrated when a man is appointed. For every man, we should be able to propose three qualified women.”

Schultz notes that the hardest “clip to fill” is in the political arena—elected positions. The more toxic the environment becomes, the more women shy away from it, partly because they understand the numbers. “It’s a combination of many factors, but I see a real reluctance to pay a personal price for a position they feel they won’t get anyway. It’s a chicken-and-egg situation,” she says.



Women demonstrating against the government (Photo: Moti Milrod)

One-Third Have Made History

The percentage of top-ranking roles that have ever been held by women since the state's establishment



To Be CEO Tomorrow Morning

The appointment of women to Number One roles—the highest-ranking positions in an organization—remains a significant challenge, as it does not align with the overall representation of women in high-ranking roles. For example, while there are currently no women serving as CEOs of government ministries, women hold a relatively high share—46 percent—of senior positions in the public service. Moreover, when considering women's representation across the broader professional public sector, including government and regulatory authorities, they account for only 11 percent—falling far short of both their presence in senior positions and their overall potential representation.

In academia, too, while no woman serves as a university president, the rate of women who serve as full professors is 21 percent. In politics, while women make up 25 percent of Knesset members, only 15 percent serve as ministers. In the local authorities, while women comprise 20 percent of local council members, only six percent are mayors.

Yet there has been a change when it comes to local government. While women still make up an extremely low percentage of the total number of mayors, the increase there – unlike in the other arenas – is continuing, and has not stalled. "I feel that women are more inclined to succeed in the municipal arena because there are many civil issues there," says Galit Shaul, mayor of the Emek Hefer Regional Council, a member of Zeira's steering committee, and a mentor to women council members

planning to run for mayor. “We are definitely in a period of reversal, and the data in this study prove it.”



Galit Shaul, mayor of the Emek Hefer Regional Council (Photo: Eyal Toueg)

“Women are more inclined to succeed in the municipal arena because there are many civil issues there. Today there is more trust in the local government, also because of the disappointment over what is going on in the national level”

The number of women in local government has increased despite the war and its challenges. Shaul ran for office against two other candidates: one a fighter pilot and the other a former lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. “Somebody asked me recently: How do you explain the fact that you were elected even though you did not come from the army? I told him that I was an education officer [an NCO in charge of education programs on an army base],” she laughs. “But I think that there is more trust in local government these days, also because of the disappointment over what is going on in the national level. I see it strongly in the rural area – we were three women mayors, and now there are six of us, and we work together.” As an example, she points to the letter signed by the local authorities in which they stated that they would not invite Eyal Golan to perform in their jurisdictions – an initiative that started with them and spread to about 70 mayors – most of them men – who signed it.

"In the end, there is no lack of talent, experience, or professionalism," Zeira says. "We see that there are enough high-ranking women who could be CEOs of these organizations tomorrow morning. What stands against them is that historically, there have been no women in these roles—no networks where 'one friend brings another.' The competitors for these positions have, historically, been men. Therefore, we decided that it was necessary to create a group of women who have done it, who know the way. It is an invaluable resource."

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