

What security means for women

Women's Security Index
Coalition, Israel

*Working at the intersection of feminist
and disability rights activism*



‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’

Mama Cash funds feminist groups and movements led by women, girls, trans people, and intersex people working to secure justice and freedom. Mama Cash’s grantee-partners include groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights activism. This story is excerpted from a longer report on feminist disability rights activism called ‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’. The full report presents the stories of eight activist groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights movements. The full report can be found on our website:

<https://www.mamacash.org/en/disability-rights-report>

Cover photo: Assia Istoshina (right) of the Women’s Security Index Coalition, interviews a disabled woman for the Index’s research on women with disabilities. The Women’s Security Index uses interviews to ensure that women’s voices and lived experiences are central in defining ‘security’. Photo: Women’s Security Index Coalition.



The issue of security dominates the political discussion in Israel. But what does security mean? And for whom? What does it mean for women, especially those from communities that are marginalised in Israeli society? In 2010, a group of radical feminist organisations – united by their feminism as well as their political stance against their country’s occupation of Palestinian territories – set out to answer these questions. The Women’s Security Index Coalition (WSI Coalition) was born. Coalition members represent and work together to promote the security concerns of women from various communities in Israel.

‘Security in Israel is perceived in militarist terms,’ explains Assia Istoshina, who leads the research for the coalition’s annual Women’s Security Index. ‘We wanted to challenge and expand the understanding of security and show what security means for women.’ The Index is an annual report detailing the situation and security needs of particular groups of women in Israel. Past Indexes have focused on women with disabilities, Russian-speaking immigrant women, and LGBTQ women, among others. Statistics are complemented by in-depth interviews to ensure that women’s voices are at the centre of the report. ‘The concerns and needs of women from marginalised communities are not known,’ says Assia. ‘These women are not heard. They are not seen. And they are not considered in policies.’ In its research, WSI Coalition avoids the common pitfall of starting with research questions that may be based on false assumptions.

Instead, the Coalition gives women the lead in articulating the issues they find most important.

More than a seat at the table

The Women’s Security Index Coalition has involved Isha L’Isha (Woman to Woman)-Haifa Feminist Center, Women Against Violence, Kayan, Aswat (Palestinian Gay Women), Coalition of Women for Peace, and New Profile-Movement for the Demilitarization of Israeli Society. The Coalition collaborates with other partners and stakeholders to identify and address important gaps in knowledge and awareness. The Index serves as a resource for diverse movements, organisations and government bodies – those who are in the position to take WSI Coalition’s findings and recommendations further in their programming and advocacy work. ‘Organisations that are working directly with women tell us they don’t have the time for detailed analysis. They often don’t have the time, or the necessary skills and expertise, to conduct research. One of the main goals of the Index is to respond to their need for this kind of analysis. We get in touch with existing organisations and see where there is potential for change. We see it as our mandate to provide information and partner with other organisations working for social change.’

For many stakeholders, considering women as a separate category with unique needs is itself novel. But WSI Coalition asks them to go deeper. The Index uses an intersectional approach,

zeroing in on the needs and experiences of women who face interconnected forms of oppression and discrimination in Israeli society. The aim is not only to increase understanding about women's specific needs, but also to improve their participation in decision-making bodies and show society what can be learned from women's unique knowledge and perspectives. 'It's not just about securing a seat at the table for women from marginalised communities,' explains Assia. 'It's about showcasing their uplifting, inspiring, and thought-provoking perspectives, such as those on gender, on the family, on the role of the state.'

Women with disabilities

Each year, the Women's Security Index focuses on a particular group. One of the earliest editions of the Index, in 2013, focused attention on women with disabilities. WSI Coalition had identified a gap in the work of feminist movements on the one hand and disability rights movements on the other. Neither seemed to be paying sufficient attention to the particular situation of women with disabilities. 'We chose the topic of women with disabilities because they are a particularly marginalised and over-looked group of women. Their needs were under-researched, and there was an opportunity to collaborate with an existing group of women with and without disabilities that is part of Isha L'Isha, one of the Coalition members.'

Disability rights issues also featured in last year's Index, which focused on elderly women, many of whom have disabilities. There is a lot of attention on

the elderly in Israel, but little is known about the specific situation and needs of elderly women from marginalised communities, including women from Israel's large Russian, Ethiopian, and Palestinian communities, many of whom speak little or no Hebrew.

Violence is a key issue

WSI Coalition has succeeded in shedding light on key challenges that women with disabilities face. Indeed, by looking at the issue of how disabled women experience security, the Index helped to illustrate that disablism itself is a security concern for women. Among other things, the 2013 Index revealed that women with disabilities commonly faced abuse, humiliation, and harassment by the state and by family members. In comparison to women without disabilities, women with disabilities were nearly three times more likely to experience physical violence from a family member. The reasons for this are complex and include many factors, one of which is economic insecurity. 'Women with disabilities are often financially dependent on their families. They have nowhere else to go,' explains Assia. 'Abusers think there will be no repercussions. They do it because they know they can get away with it.' In interviews for the Index, many women revealed their fears of leaving an abusive husband, losing their homes, and being put in an institution. Up until 2017, people with disabilities in Israel received social assistance that amounted to just half of the minimum wage. It was not nearly enough money to cover the basic cost of living, let alone the costs of living with a disability,

which is often more expensive (as it is left to individuals to absorb the cost of most accommodations needed, rather than treat barriers to participation as social issues, the costs of which should be born by society). Disability rights activists protested the situation under the slogan, 'People with disabilities are not half people.' Their struggle led to an increase in the amount, but it is still significantly less than the minimum wage.

The Index also revealed that women with disabilities experienced a much higher rate of sexual violence perpetrated by strangers. They were also four times more likely than other women to have experienced harassment or rude and humiliating treatment from government institutions. 'One of every three women with disabilities has experienced some sort of harassment by the state,' says Assia. 'The state institutions are there to provide services and protect the rights of women with disabilities. Instead, they themselves are perpetrating abuse.'

The Index contributed to improved knowledge and awareness among feminist and disability justice activist groups, and challenged some common assumptions in Israeli society about the priorities, problems, and needs of women with disabilities. 'Most people assumed that women with disabilities were mainly concerned about difficulties in accessing work or in finding a romantic partner or having children,' explains Assia. 'So if you designed a programme that was supposed to answer the needs of women with disabilities based on those assumptions,

you would be missing some very important issues'.

WSI Coalition's intersectional analysis has generated some important new insights. For example, while only 8.8 per cent of Jewish women described themselves as women with disabilities, the figure was 19 per cent for Palestinian women. Among other things, the difference reflects a disparity in access to health services and in health outcomes. Palestinian women in general, and Palestinian women with disabilities in particular, have more limited access to transportation, and thus to hospitals and doctors, which contributes to a higher proportion of Palestinian women self-reporting as being disabled.

The lack of accessible transportation was also a key finding in the Coalition's recent report on elderly women, about half of whom have disabilities. Elderly women from marginalised communities often do not have a driver's licence, so they need to rely on public transportation, which can be inaccessible or unsuitable. Another issue raised was the lack of language accessibility of public services, a problem that affects many women in Israel, including women with disabilities and elderly women who are not Hebrew-speaking. The WSI Coalition is part of a new coalition that is pushing this issue, advocating for improved language accessibility of public services. Housing is another key issue raised in the 2020 Index: many elderly women cannot afford to live on the ground floor and are forced to live in houses without lifts. 'If you're elderly, disabled, and non-

Hebrew speaking, you're stuck,' says Assia.

The Women's Security Index Coalition specialises in research, putting crucial information in the hands of partners and stakeholders who can advocate for social change. An example is Isha L'Isha, which has a project involving both women with and without disabilities aimed at promoting the rights of women with disabilities. The Isha L'Isha group has used the Index findings in their consciousness-raising and policy-influencing work. The group is currently developing a leadership course for women with disabilities to increase their participation in political decision-making. The group aims to challenge the portrayal of women with disabilities as passive recipients of social assistance and to highlight their contribution to society, such as their efforts to improve the accessibility of urban spaces to the benefit of many, including children, cyclists, and the elderly, among others.

Consensus takes time

WSI Coalition has learned many lessons in relation to its intersectional work. For one thing, a lot must be taken into account for organisations, and society in general, to be truly inclusive and ensure full equality and accessibility for all, including women with disabilities as well as other marginalised groups. Given the scope of the problem, there is always the risk of compromising in ways that may benefit one group but not another. There is always the argument that there is not enough money to make the

necessary changes to accommodate everyone. As feminists, WSI Coalition sees consensus-building as key to dealing with this challenge.

'Cooperation between groups with different agendas is very important,' says Assia. 'The more you try to create an intersectional approach, the more time it takes to come to consensus.' This fact is very relevant for donors. 'Donors need transparency, numbers, and reporting, but there is a risk that the number becomes the goal and not the means. It can be like you are running on a treadmill, constantly trying to keep up with the demands of donors.' Another problem is that organisations are forced to compete for resources by staking their claim as the 'best' group working on a particular issue or with a certain constituency. 'It creates a lot of tension,' explains Assia. Donors can play a role in changing the situation by being more flexible and open, and supporting groups to work together. 'Support for movements, for collaboration and building relationships is crucial.'

Acknowledgements

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The name of the full report 'If you stay quiet, you stay invisible,' is a quote from Fela Razafinjato, of Association des Femmes Handicapées de Madagascar.

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