



Being *civil* is not enough: on practices of citizenship of women living in poverty in Israel

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Abstract

The public housing crisis became politically salient during and after the 2011 Tents Protest in Israel. Alongside demands from the young largely Jewish middle class to restore the economic order, many women in poverty took to the streets hoping to affect a change in the neoliberal course. This protest extended beyond the summer of 2011, and it was there where Gal the ‘researcher’ and Riki the ‘activist’ met. During our joint endeavour we wondered; how do women in poverty become activists and what incentivizes them to turn their personal struggle into a political collective act? This paper stems from our decision to bring together our respective knowledge and experience to the benefit of the struggle. Using life stories as our method we track the personal histories of women in poverty in order to better understand their journey away and towards home, and how the interpretation and conceptualization of their predicament has shaped their struggle. Theoretically, we employ the distinction offered by James Tully between *civil*/modern and *civic*/diverse modes of citizenship. By bringing the women’s voices to the fore and listening to what they say, we demonstrate first, how their disappointment at the *civil* path to rights led to a distinct *civic* mode of citizenship; and, second, how by diversifying their forms of citizenship performance they re-constitute themselves as worthy, deserving citizens. We thus argue against common interpretations of people in poverty as irrational, apathetic and passive citizens, lacking the *right(s)* repertoire to fight against their social marginalization and being unworthy of their legal entitlements as citizens.

Keywords

women in poverty, women life story, civil/civic citizenship, home, housing rights

Introduction

‘You are just plain boring. Give us something interesting’ *PM Benjamin Netanyahu to a Likud activist*¹

The origins of this paper lie in the meeting between the two of us in 2014 when Gal was researching grassroots activism in the post-2011 Tents Protest and Riki was one of the activists of the *Not Nice* group² which was at the core of his work (Levy, 2017). The 2011 Tents Protest, that was part of the global wave of anti-neoliberal uprisings yielded two paths for politicization, differentiated by class. While its main protagonists were the young, urban middle class, the protests also swept the lower class who for a decade suffered austerity inflicted upon them by neoliberal anti-poor policies formulated by then Minister of Finance, Benjamin Netanyahu. In what follows we seek to depict the political struggle of the latter—in our case, women in poverty—for a decent living.

About a year after this first meeting, Gal started studying the struggle for public housing, an offshoot of the 2011 protest movement. At that time, the *Not Nice* activists became involved in this struggle so our paths crossed again. Riki first became the key interlocutor for this research, before we became friends and colleagues in the struggle. In 2017, we decided to collaborate in research when we understood that the particular knowledge that each of us brought to the conversation could enrich a larger audience. Later that year, we responded to a call to join the Oral History Lab at Tel Aviv University, with a proposal to investigate the stories of women who experience life in poverty. The materials from this ongoing research and from Gal’s research on the struggle for public housing—as well as Riki’s own story as a woman who was born, raised and is living to date, in public housing—helps to inform our current endeavour into the stories of women who experience poverty and their path to becoming *deserving* citizens in Israeli society.

Unlike the Israeli Prime Minister (in the citation above) we did not find the stories and insights of our interviewees boring or dull. The danger, contained in his utterance, of silencing citizens that speak from the margins and objectifying the poor holds for academic discourse as well. For a while now, critical scholars remind us that writing about poverty must avoid voyeurism, patronizing and othering of people living in poverty. A more comprehensive and thorough understanding of their lives ought to be informed also by the expertise of those who experience poverty (Deveaux, 2016; Lister, 2004; Piachaud, 1987). Writing about people who live in poverty must, then, be attentive to the materiality of poverty whilst also, more importantly, to the non-material aspects of life in the social margins. The latter includes, as Lister (2004, p. 7) rightly asserts, the everyday interactions with their immediate environment and society at large through the symbolic ways in which poverty is depicted and understood. Our investigation’s incentive lies in these everyday

¹ This was an intuitive response from the PM to a question posed by an activist from his own party regarding the absence of emergency medical services in her northern hometown. He later tried to excuse it. Ynet, 16.10.2018.

² The *Not Nice* organized towards the end of the 2011 social protest, seeking to raise issues that were designated as pertaining to the social margins. Its name alludes to the utterance of Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir who described the Mizrahi activists of the Israeli Black Panthers as ‘not nice’ (Levy, 2017).

interactions and experiences that led our interlocutors to politicize and extend their personal struggle to the public sphere. How they brought meaning to their struggle with poverty may also shed much needed light on the exploration of radical citizenship. To paraphrase both McNay (2014) and Piachaud (1987), radical theory must reconnect to human suffering if it wishes to be relevant and capable of being part of the solution rather than of the problem.

The life stories on which this article is founded are of young women, all mothers in their thirties and forties, who experience poverty. Our goal was to trace back their life courses in order to understand their struggle with poverty. Whilst home was not our main focus, this notion repeatedly surfaced in their stories. Their biographies were predicated on the experience of being removed from home, or left homeless at a young age. In each story, the quest for home is an integral part of their journey. Home is not merely a physical place or structure; it is a notion, an orientation, a journey (e.g. Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Mallett, 2004). People form their identities at their home, they feel safe there. It is a place to leave but also to return to as one pleases or needs. In this respect being away is the opposite to being at home. Yet critical geography and feminist theorists reject such binaries (ibid.). Ahmed (1999, p. 340), most famously, questions this ‘model of the home as familiarity [that] projects strangeness beyond [its] walls’. What if being at home is already encountered with strangeness?, she asks. She thus proposes to see home and away not as divided opposites. Home can be alienating inasmuch as moving away may restore one’s sense of security. The movement between home and away, then, is what makes one feel where home is, where one feels ‘at home’. For hooks (2015), this movement meant making home a safe haven from the racism outside, a place to find comfort with other women in the family. The biographical stories that we heard revealed this search for homeliness, or its absence. Making a home was, specifically, a part of citizenship. Employing insights from recent advancements in citizenship studies, we offer a more nuanced understanding of how the *unentitled* perform their citizenship, and how these women’s quest for rights, and particularly the right to housing, shifts between *civil* and *civic* modes of citizenship (Tully, 2014). We argue that, through this struggle for home, these marginalized women exercise their subjectivities and become radical citizens.

1. From crisis to acts of citizenship after 2011

The lack of access to adequate housing is one indicator of poverty, and a cause of precarious life (Lister, 2004, p. 31). Public housing had been one resource that the Israeli state, like other developmental states, was distributing since the early 1950s and through the early 1970s in accordance with its nation-building interests (e.g. Hananel, 2017). These interests prioritized Jewish settlers and immigrants over the Arab-Palestinian indigenous citizens, rendering the emerging welfare state a mechanism for conferring full citizenship status to Jews (Shalev, 2007). Within this system of Jewish favouritism, there was also an unequal distribution of public resources which caused periodic protests, particularly against the dereliction and shortage of housing for marginalized populations, mainly Mizrahi Jews (those who originated from Middle Eastern and North African countries) (e.g. Bernstein, 1984). Thus, while their Ashkenazi counterparts (Jews who originated from Europe) were

encouraged to gain full ownership over their allocated flats, Mizrahi Jews were more likely to retain their status as renters in low cost state-owned public housing (see Rabinowitz 2000). In the 1980s, while retreat from welfarism, the shrinking supply of public housing and an increase in privatisation became global phenomena, Israel stood out in its extreme measures. Unlike other welfare states, it completely halted the construction of public housing, which is currently a marginal policy pertaining to a mere two point five per cent of the lowest income population (Hananel, 2017, p. 2444). To relieve the growing demand for housing, the eligibility bar was raised, leaving mainly disadvantaged single mothers facing the sharp shortage. Allocations took longer time and many were referred to rentals in the private market. In 2015, of the 40.9 per cent of the lowest household income decile who lived in rented flats, only 9.6 per cent were in public housing. That same year, their average expenditure on rent, private or public, amounted to 62 per cent of disposable income (Swirski & Hoffmann-Dishon, 2017). According to the Ministry of Housing, in a recent response to a legal petition from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, some 171,000 households receive rental allowance, a figure that only in the last four years increased by some 26,000 households (Yaron, 2019). Moreover, the same ministry admitted to not knowing how the rental allowance is calculated, confirming that it had not been updated for years despite the sharp rise in rental costs (*ibid.*). In an address to the Knesset, the then Minister of Housing confirmed that overall about one million citizens received aid towards housing (Knesset, 2016, p. 18). Towards the end of his term in office and responding to growing pressures from activists, he sought to approve a grandiose plan to build some 70 thousands new public housing flats titled 'To Live in Dignity'. However, the work of the government-appointed committee to implement this plan was halted, first by the Ministry of Finance and then again when Israel underwent new elections. A recent report by Adva Centre claims that the existing programmes for housing, primarily those based on private rental are partial and problematic, deepening social inequality rather than alleviating tenants' insecurity (Swirski & Hoffmann-Dishon, 2017).

There is an abundance of evidence suggesting that the wave of uprisings and protests which engulfed the world following the Arab uprisings in 2010-11 exposed the limits of (neo)liberal citizenship (e.g. Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013; Sloam, 2014). These uprisings that brought the protesters back to their home square (Hardt & Negri, 2012) were a manifestation of the frustration of the younger cohorts of the middle class given the lack of economic opportunities. They equally exhibited a growing resentment towards the political elites and institutions from both left and right, bringing about a crisis of representation and a political mobilisation for change (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014). Israel was no exception. The 2011 Tents Protest redrew the contours of mainstream politics (Talshir, 2015) and spawned several activist groups. Some became involved in an attempt to rekindle the protest in the following summer, which was met with the fierce hand of the state (Rabinowitz, 2014). For these activists, the protest that started and ended in the summer of 2011 had barely touched upon the critical issues of housing, employment and rights that continued to concern the disabled, the asylum-seekers, people who live in poverty, Ethiopian Jews and more. Typically, although both Jewish and Arab citizens took to the streets in 2011 (Massalha et. al. 2017), the ensuing struggles, particularly over housing, had evolved in

parallel paths (Levy 2015). The dire state of housing, or home more broadly, for Palestinians, both citizens and non-citizens, is bound to progress separately, as Israeli society is deeply segregated and there are few paths for cross-national collaboration.³ In these protests, women activists became prominent in taking their personal struggle for decent housing to the public sphere – engagements that can be considered acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008).

Shortly before the 2011 protest, a group of left-leaning activists formed the Public Housing Team to draw attention to the emanating social crisis and, particularly, to the housing debacle (Levy, in writing). The struggle for public housing continued to gain traction during 2011, when it coincided with the middle class struggle for affordable housing and intensified further towards the 2013 general elections. While The Public Housing Team, and subsequently the Forum for Public Housing, became the leading spaces through which the protest was organised, that activism was led by the *strugglers* – poor women in need of housing who became political activists. After years of neglect, these women resurrected the issue of public housing from political oblivion. A key tactic involved targeting the Minister of Housing and his political Zionist-religious party (ironically named, The Jewish Home) by gatecrashing the party’s political assemblies as a way to raise public awareness about the liquidation of public housing stock through the selling of flats (at abhorrently low prices) in the private market, mainly to interested NGOs (some of which were closely affiliated with this party and based in the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories). This struggle forms part of the backdrop against which the women, whose stories are told here, were seeking to alleviate their suffering and to materialize their right to decent housing.

In 2013 this effort drove several Members of Knesset from both the opposition and the coalition to form a Public Housing Lobby. In collaboration with the Forum and the *strugglers*, the lobby initiated an annual Housing Day at the Knesset. On these days, major Knesset committees dedicated their meetings to raising various aspects of the housing crisis: from a lack of resources to failed eligibility criteria. In this forum, the *strugglers* played a major role as advocates and, indeed, experts. They took part in setting the meetings’ agenda and preparing materials and discussion papers based on information and knowledge that they themselves gathered. Here, the abstract right to housing turned into concrete demands that reflected the *strugglers*’ distinctive knowledge and experiences. Their citizenship activism was therefore manifest not only on the streets but also in the echelons of the legislature which is not a typical site of poor people’s grassroots activism.

1.1 Between *civil* and *civic* citizenship

The political upheavals of 2011 drew attention to new pertinent questions in citizenship studies regarding ‘how citizenship is done?’ (Isin, 2017; Tully, 2014), and ‘who is doing citizenship?’ (Gray, 2015; Turner, 2016). Apparently, the figure of the citizen—depicted in

³ Although this goes beyond the scope of this research, the question of home for the Palestinians (again both within and without the Green Line) cannot be overstated. While in the Occupied Territories (where Palestinians are not free to build their homeland) the concept of home is constantly threatened by the occupying forces, within the Green Line Palestinian citizens suffer from measures that span from the bureaucratic (planning) to the physical (demolition) that delimit their sense of homeliness (e.g. Sayigh 2007; Yiftachel 2006; Mead 2011).

legalistic and normative definitions as ‘a liberal, white, bourgeois, heterosexual, man [that] inherently leads to the powerful hierarchization and securitisation of others’ (Turner, 2016, p. 142)—was not sufficiently inclusive of those who act from the social margins. Citizens and non-citizens, who perhaps in the past confined themselves to silence (Gray, 2015) were seeking to unsettle the extant binary of inclusion/exclusion by emerging as new political subjects (Turner, 2016, p. 143) and performing their subjectivities in new ways (Isin, 2017). How, then, is citizenship done?

Thinking of citizenship as an open-ended and contested concept, James Tully (2014) proposes to think of its possible meanings within the framework of two modes of becoming a citizen. A *mode* of citizenship, he posits, ‘refers to the ensemble comprised of a distinctive language of citizenship and its traditions of interpretation on the one hand and the corresponding practices and institutions to which it refers and in which it is used on the other.’ (Tully, 2014, p. 7). He names the two modes ‘modern/civil’ and ‘diverse/civic’: the former is associated with the historic processes of modernisation and colonisation, and its practices are confined within and by the institutions of modern democracy, mainly alleged universalism and the rule of law; the latter is associated with multiple practices of citizenship that challenge the extant rules of the game. In other words, while *modern* citizenship is defined by status, the *diverse* mode is determined by acts. Furthermore, if the former is identified with *civility* and the restoring of the status quo, the latter seeks to challenge and unsettle it. These two modes, we propose, also bear different meanings for rights claiming.

Current debates regarding the relevance and value of radical democratic theory point to its limitations in transcending the liberal imagination (Conway & Singh, 2011; Robinson & Tormey, 2008; Tambakaki, 2017). Both D’Souza (2018) and Hoover (2016) propose that the notion of rights has long been instrumental in maintaining the middle class’s upper hand rather than being a tool in the hands of or for the disadvantaged. Hoover posits that rather than debating the nature of rights we ought to ‘understand human rights as contested and plural’, focusing on the projects that we choose to pursue (Hoover, 2015, p. 1094). In this vein, the right to housing is considered in relation to the quest for adequate housing for the poor, and those who seek it are given priority in its interpretation. Similarly, Cox (2015) was listening to how young Black women in a shelter in Detroit were shifting the terms that deemed them unworthy to their (legal) entitlements, and by doing so rendered themselves deserving citizens in their own eyes. Our interviewees, too, occasionally burst into a bitter laughter when we were asking them what rights meant to them. As they were telling their stories the reason for this laughter crystallized. A recurring theme was how they were trying to walk the *right(s) path*, approaching state agencies and demanding what they deemed was theirs, only to discover that their right to have rights was questioned. To illustrate this trajectory we employ Tully’s distinction between *civil* and *civic* citizenship so we can distinguish those who are purportedly deserving of their rights from those who are not.

1.2 Methodology

The interviews that comprise the empirical body of this paper were conducted by both of us between December 2017 to October 2018. To date, we interviewed five women of the dozen who responded to an advert that we published on [Facebook](#). All of them knew Riki from their own struggles, in which she was involved. Gal also interviewed one of them before as part of his study of the public housing struggle, and another was interviewed twice as we returned to her to complement details from her life story. Riki has put her own story into a narrative which reflected her experience in relation to those of our interviewees. All interviews were recorded, videotaped, transcribed and analysed by both of us in search of recurring themes. The main theme that transpired and to which we refer to here is the women's politicisation and the meanings they attached to the different paths to rights. In what follows we narrate their stories at length as we find it important to give room to their own voices (Atkinson, 2012). Before though, a note on ethics is in order.

The women that we both knew from the field—those interviewed and others who were interviewed for other projects—did not only consent to appear by their real names, they demanded it. The main reason is that they see this research as an extension of their political quest. It is a means to visibilise and politicise their personal stories and to bring their cause to the fore, and a way to hopefully mobilize the academia too and inform it with their own knowledge. Also, by now some of the women's stories were already part of the public domain, especially on social media and as such could be recognizable in other printed format. As we see below, in the words of Hagit, they are no longer ashamed of their situation nor do they try to hide their identity. This raises a final point: namely, who are the women who live in poverty? In Israel, it is almost granted that women in poverty—who are not Palestinian citizens—are mostly of Mizrahi backgrounds. The intersection of class and ethnicity is consistent across various indices. For instance, working women of Mizrahi background earn 60 per cent of their male counterparts and 75 per cent of Ashkenazi's women counterpart. This is also consistent over time (Swirski, Konor-Atias, & Lieberman, 2019). Moreover, on their path to materialize their rights, these women are continually confronted by social workers and other state officials who are mostly Ashkenazi and middle-class. Yet except for Shlomit, ethnicity was rarely raised in the interviews and referred to mostly in response to our query about their families' origins. We argue that given the prevalence of intra-Jewish ethnicity in the public political discourse, the women's Mizrahi background should not be overlooked. Bearing in mind then that poverty is not colour-blind, we now turn to the stories.

2. From civil to civic acts of citizenship

2.1 Being civil

Shlomit vividly recalls her first encounter with the welfare agency in her hometown:

At first, when I was fifteen, my mother tried to commit suicide and we lost our (rented) house. It was the first thing I did because I was fifteen and I had no home, I went to

the welfare.⁴ It was early in the morning because I had nowhere to sleep, I waited there all night long, waiting awake on a bench in a nearby park. I came in as they opened: ‘hello, I am Shlomit Tzafri, I am fifteen years old and I have nowhere to go’. She replied, ‘No problem, sit here in the chair’. I sat on the chair the way you sit now. And I sat down and sat and sat and sat and sat, and what did I care? I have nowhere to go anyway, I sit. Sitting, sitting. I did not ask for a glass of water. I did not get up to pee. I sat on this chair as if my life was hanging on it, I did not move from the chair. She told me sit on the chair, and I sat on the chair and did not move. Suddenly, at noon—I did not realise it was already noon before a policeman and a policewoman entered. The policeman told me: ‘miss, get out of here’. I was in shock, you know, and I ask him: ‘why?’”. He told me that it was because I was rioting. I said, ‘sorry sir, but I did not do anything, I just sat here. I did not do anything. [...] sir I am fifteen years old. I came to ask for help, I have nowhere to go’. He looked at me, then at the social worker, I don’t know what she said to him. He said to me, ‘okay, listen, there’s nothing to do here, you should get out of here or I’ll take you to the station’. I told him ‘fine, thank you’ {sarcastically} and I left... that’s it. I understood that nothing good would come from the welfare.⁵

Ronit, now a mother of five in her forties, also recalls her first failing encounter with the state when she sought to escape drug addiction and abuse:

I turned to the welfare [when] I was living with someone who also abused me, and told them my story. I told them, please help me, take me to rehab. I live with someone who beats me, please, I want to quit. I want to get out from here. And I will not forget that they did not want to help me. They did not. They told me that I needed money, I told them, I don’t have money, help me. I have no money. How much to go to rehab, a thousand shekels? Welfare... as if {sarcastically}!

Gal- You mean you were at the welfare?

Ronit - Yes. Yes.

Riki - You asked for help?

Ronit - I asked for help in tears, tears.

Gal - How old were you then?

Ronit-I was twenty-something, twenty-three something like that. Twenty-three or twenty-four.

Riki confronted this sense of helplessness differently when she and her husband realized that her meagre salary would not suffice to rent a flat in the free market without accumulating debt. Then, she recalls,

there were vacant public housing flats when we had no chance of becoming eligible for it. These vacant flats were squatted in by the homeless, who were either evacuated or seeking eligibility. Information about vacant flats was transmitted by word of mouth in the neighbourhood and then we heard from my husband’s neighbour that her son was in jail and his flat was vacant.

⁴ In colloquial Hebrew the term welfare is used as abbreviation to the social services.

⁵ The quotations from the interviews were translated by us from the original transcription. We tried to maintain the spoken tone of the language, while adapting it to the English reader. We also made an effort not to cut short the narrative in order to transmit the flow of the conversation/interview. We added in {} descriptors of the reactions of the interviewees in the course of the interview.

Expecting their first daughter they agreed with the jailed tenant that they would pay for his prison canteen and keep the flat from being squatted.

We knew that when he had served his time we would have to vacate the flat. After I gave birth to my eldest daughter we understood that vacating the flat was unthinkable, where would we go? We were trying to look for alternatives, but everything was way too expensive. The night after his release, he overdosed and died and we thought that we would stay in the flat. A few days later his wife arrived, it turned out that she ran away because of his violent behaviour and now she wanted the flat for herself and her two young children. We had to make a difficult decision. It was clear that we couldn't leave her kids homeless on the streets.

Knowing that the state was not going to solve their dilemma they sought an alternative squat, and only then did they let the widow and her children return to their home. Later, when the housing company dragged them to court because of squatting, Riki's husband slapped his identity card on the bench: 'if there's no law *for* me, let there not be a law *against* me', he told the judge, adding that he would claim asylum in the Palestinian authority.

Hagit, a mother of five from a southern town, recalls her encounter with the welfare services:

I worked for the rail company as a cashier, and then got married and I think that these years took me back to my childhood, it was a flashback to my life in poverty. With [my first husband] I reached near starvation. No food. My eldest boy was underweight. They brought the welfare, we were at the infants' clinic and they called in the child welfare officer, and I didn't know why. I knew what the child welfare officer was implying unfortunately. I grew up in this cycle. She says to me that my child was underweight and that I had starved him. What could I tell her? That I was married to a gambler? What could I tell her? That I was alone in this foreign city with only his family around, and that he's not willing to seek help and I have no money for food or formula milk, and at this point you shove cheese with sugar in his mouth just to pacify his hunger.

Hagit divorced her first husband and moved back to her parents, which gave her a short relief. When Riki met her she was trying to save her second family from falling into a debt spiral from renting in the 'free' market. This led her to become an activist in the public housing struggle. In our interview with Hagit, when asked for her life story, she began with the struggle for public housing, as if she was reborn with this struggle that had given her a flat in public housing.

These stories of the initial encounters with state agencies are demonstrative of the personal journey that these women underwent. Being focused on their daily survival they, at first, approached the social services innocently or intuitively to seek help. Some, like Riki, learnt sooner rather than later that the official channels led to nothing but dead ends. The stories of Shlomit and Daniel, below, are telling. As early as their teens they were met with the cold shoulder of the state and its failure to adequately address their need for proper shelter and education. Their lives seemed characterised by a protracted struggle to escape abusive partners or rough life on the streets. These women had to develop their own survival strategies. They knew their rights, but were also all too aware of the obstacles in voicing, let alone receiving them. To paraphrase Tully, they were lacking the *civility* which is required for

being regarded as worthy of one's entitlements and rights. If they wished to change this, and to turn from clients to citizens (Auyero, 2012), they had to forsake the *civil* path, but not by becoming uncivil. They had to *civicize* (Tully 2014), creating their own networks and know-how that would allow them to manoeuvre within the corridors of the state bureaucracy and the echelons of power. They had to, in other words, politicize.

2.2 Going public

Daniel was removed from home when she was 11 years old. Before she turned fifteen she had already moved between several places and institutions. Tragically, her efforts to refrain from the use of drugs which was of course common in these young girls' institutions led her eventually to run away and fall into the hands of a man who abused her sexually and financially for eight years. When we met Daniel she was already a mother of three daughters and her life had not gotten any easier.. After escaping the man who abused her, she realized that he had left her not only with an emotional trauma, but also with a tremendous debt. Heroically, she had managed to create a better life for her daughters after a social worker drew her attention to a programme for young women in the college in her hometown. Joining the programme rekindled her desire for learning and reminded her of her missing school years (she stopped studying regularly at eighth grade). Daniel told us:

In parallel, I began believing in myself. I joined several programmes in the college, programmes of empowerment, of rights. [I began] initiating projects for the economic rehabilitation of women who were coming out of shelters. I completed my matriculation [and] was recommended to study law. As soon as I left the interview [for the law course] I knew, in that moment, I had a fighting spirit, and that I wouldn't take no for an answer. You shut the doors, I'll find a window, and if I don't find a window, I will use a hammer. I'll find a crack [to get in]. I was accepted [to the programme] and felt enthusiastic and hopeful.

At this point a severe illness has changed her course again. Instead of concentrating on her studies, she had to fight again. Being unable to walk up the stairs to her third floor flat, she asked to be re-housed on the ground floor. The Ministry of Housing was dragging its heels, and so, her growing sense for justice as a law student and personal dire predicament sent her to seek remedy in a public, politicized struggle.

Shlomit, who we met earlier, found herself pushed from one institution to another after being forsaken by the welfare services at the age of fifteen. In her compulsory military service, she served two terms in military jail for going AWOL, after being refused time to take care of her mother who was hospitalized with a mental illness. She was discharged prematurely into the streets where she became engaged in delinquent behaviour and, eventually, prostitution. At the age of 26 Shlomit was living with her mother, with a new born baby boy, she thought her life was moving in the right direction. However, the same welfare services that had failed her when she was seeking help stepped back into her life. They came for her two year old child, and he was taken away. After being failed by the court, who sided with the social worker, she had started her struggle once more.

Gal – How did you manage to bring [your child] back home?

Shlomit – {laughing} Wow, I started a struggle. I understood that I needed to start protests and I understood that from the people I knew, no one will leave home [to fight for me]. I started seeing on Facebook people who protest and they were madly into it {smiles in excitement}, and they protested on many things, you know, you could see a lot of action with them. And then I saw one protest ... I think it was to reform the debt-execution authority or maybe it was a protest against police violence. [...]

I remember that Sapir [one of the activists] approached me and asked what I was doing in the protest. I told her that all my life I was beaten by the police. It was so regular in my life, I saw no one who was more fit for this protest than me {laughing bitterly}. Yes, [I experienced it all] when I was in the streets: beating, sexual harassments, [I was] spared nothing.

Gal – the police?

Shlomit – yes, yes. And then I told her my name was Shlomit Tzafri and that my baby was taken and everything. And she told me to talk to Riki. I asked who Riki was and she says this woman, and I look and see her standing facing the police on the fence {laughing} [...] I approached her and I don't recall exactly how I started the conversation but it was the weirdest thing. Imagine yourself in a protest.

Riki – then, when we sat on the pavement, or later?

Shlomit – we connected immediately but my initial approach to you was bizarre. I didn't know you and suddenly I approach a woman in the middle of a protest and asked her if her kids were removed [by the social services]. [...] But two minutes later we were friends, and Riki accompanied me all along. Riki is {laughter, crying, and a short pause} Riki really fought with me, she did everything and came with me whenever it was needed. She absorbed my pain and anger. {crying} Ask yourself, this person, isn't it enough the shit she endures herself? From where does she get the strength [to help] others, from where? [...] and we started to fight, and activists started to join my protests against the welfare, and they started to accompany me to the courts, and the protests grew bigger and then the [mainstream] media started to cover [my story]. The media that I was chasing for two years and never looked me in the eye.

Eventually, Riki mobilized the *Not Nice* activists (against some internal frictions) and Shlomit's struggle became public, culminating in a huge protest in Tel Aviv, where other mothers whose children were removed by the social services brought up their own personal stories and struggles. After two years of high profile struggle her son was returned to her. However, the hardships never ceased and at the time of the interview Shlomit herself was asking that her son be put in a boarding school so he would not suffer the scarcity that he suffers at home with her.

2.3 Becoming political

In order for us, as poor and oppressed people, to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn how to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to, and understanding, the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. *Ella Baker 1969*

The moment of 2011 was significant for numerous political struggles in Israel and indeed, across the world. It is difficult to overstate the role of social media in generating this renewed interest in politics and its impact on political participation (e.g. Castells, 2015; Ram & Filc, 2017; Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014). Nor should one underestimate the impact of the rising middle class to protest against the neoliberal regime that impaired their economic wellbeing. Yet, we should also not forget that marginalized women (and fewer men) were protesting against these economic measures already at the turn of the century (e.g. Lavie, 2014), when the middle class was still optimistic about the achievements of globalization (Ben-Porat, 2005; Shalev & Levy, 2005). Bearing this in mind, we ask to give primacy to the moment of politicization of these women and allow them to own their act of radicalizing their citizenship.

After Riki's husband slapped his identity card on the bench, the judge issued a warrant forbidding the housing company to evict them from their flat and they became eligible tenants in public housing. In return, they were required to repay their debt for the rent and Riki was able to become employed again after barricading herself in the house for fear of evacuation. However, Riki's personal struggle had just begun. Ten years later, with five children she escaped from her violent and abusive husband to a shelter, where she was constantly worried about keeping the flat. This was the one thing that she was willing to risk her life for. However, she was trapped between her husband and the state. As her husband refused to divorce her, and as long as he was a co-occupier of the flat, the state would not give her a replacement one and she was unable to work or receive a social security allowance. A friend gave her a computer and connected her to the internet and as she started surfing various chat rooms she found herself chatting with an anonymous person who offered her help to move to another flat. At that time, public housing was not as scarce, and shortly after, she was informed that her husband would be released from jail and housed across the street from her and the children. The violence returned but by then Riki confronted it head on:

I felt that my back was against the wall and that I needed to take action. I entered his flat closing the door behind me and told him that this is his time to execute all his threats and that I was not leaving. We have five kids and we should learn to live with one another. He was taken aback by my assertiveness. I no longer felt fear.

During the 2011 social protest Riki became aware of the political discourse in social media. It was at first the protest against the high cost of living, known as the Cottage Protest (after the rising price of the cottage cheese). This annoyed her: "They were complaining about chocolate bars and cheese while we had nothing to eat and no money to pay the electricity and water bills". Riki then became a political activist.

While each life story evolved along a different trajectory, there was a similarity that ran through the stories which has to do with the way these women *do* citizenship and claim themselves as worthy citizens of the state. It was about their understanding of how to translate their entitlement into a political right. In other words, the commonality between these stories was their shift to activism as part of becoming knowledgeable about their predicament.

Shlomit, for example, told us about a therapist she saw whose wakeup call has made her stop complaining to herself and become proactive. She started delving into Facebook to learn about her situation:

Gal – You started studying the subject?

Shlomit – To study the subject, and to tell my story everywhere. I was standing in the street, at the red light of the pedestrian crossing and a man was asking me for the time. I flooded him with my story. Every person I bumped into would hear my story. As if, I don't know, to fart it, to scream it ... and it worked, it caught. People all the time were shocked and not many were mobilized, but it created awareness. And then when I was in the media, many told themselves, 'hey this is the person I drove in my cab,' 'hey I saw this woman at the traffic light' {laughing}.

Gal – And then you started collaborating [with the activists]?

Shlomit – The struggle of my life, yes.

Gal – Did it give you strength?

Shlomit – If it gave me strength? Plenty. Plenty.

Hagit, to recall, started off her struggle by realizing the need to literally take her frustration to the street. And so she did, pitching a tent for her family in front of the local office of the Ministry of Housing.

When I started my struggle people were calling me a parasite. At first I was ashamed, telling myself, 'wow they say I am a parasite'. But with time, when you feel empowered, one woman after another, we accumulated strength. I [then] said to myself why would they call me a parasite, just because my life wasn't smiling on me, because I didn't grow up in a palace, or to parents with money. Unfortunately, I grew up with parents who themselves were penniless and in debt. It's a cycle, from where you came there you go, and your children will go there too.

Hagit, like Riki, has become an activist in the struggle for public housing. Even before she succeeded to resolve her personal situation and be housed in a nearby town, she was advocating for a policy change by protesting and participating in vigils and in hearings at Knesset committees. She is a member of the Forum for Public Housing and in that capacity she also receives requests for help from other women. Some of the women were still absorbed in their personal quest, yet their stories are no longer private. By exposing their stories to the public eye, they have become part of a network of women and men whose struggle with poverty and neglect in the social margins is no longer a personal matter. This, we argue in the conclusion, is how these women *civicize* and position themselves in a different relationship with the state.

Conclusion

The question of how people who experience poverty conceptualize the world and understand their predicament has been of major concern for a long time. Krumer-Nevo (2005, p. 99) reminds us that, for researchers and policymakers, the personal stories of poor people are mere anecdotes, used as an illustration of 'life in poverty', similarly to the image of 'the empty refrigerator' on the news on the day the annual report on poverty is made

public. Neither the knowledge of these people nor their interpretation of their reality are considered valuable. Equally, how people who live in poverty, or working class people at large, understand the language of rights is regarded as stemming from different repertoires of social conceptions and as a matter of not sharing the 'liberal grammar' of the human rights discourse (Mizrachi, 2016). Ann Swidler (1986) has taken a different view in her classic 'culture in action'. She chose 'culture of poverty' as an example to her insightful approach to culture. Instead of understanding culture as a set of values that triggers action, she saw it as a tool-kit to be used strategically by different players. In this respect, assuming that people who experience poverty value or aspire to different things ignores the fact that they work with different tools according to a different reading of reality. That is, their reading of their real predicament differs from that offered by middle class observers (Edin & Lein, 1997). This, we propose, is also reflected in the different meanings of rights that transpire in the women's stories.

'[H]uman rights are what we make of them.' (Hoover, 2015, p. 1093). For the women whose stories are told here the question of what having a home means to them is answered by what they do. Home for them is more than a physical shelter, it is a safe haven from the abuse that they suffer in the outside world (hooks, 2015). When we returned to Daniel for a second interview she was already in her own home in public housing. As well as being a home for her and her daughters, it has also become a home for wounded animals that she gathered in the streets to care for. This was a revealing moment. Being 'at home', although not relieving these women from poverty, is experienced as the materialization of what is a human imperative, an undeniable entitlement and a meaningful improvement that allows them to bring order into their lives and manifest their desires. Scattered evidence from other women who were housed through this struggle supports this claim.

When we were heading back home from the interviews, we were reflecting on the answers our interviewees gave to our question: 'what do rights mean to you?'. Shlomit burst in laughter.

You're cute. This is of the rich. What are rights? Who has rights? Rights cost money, what are rights, those that I don't know of, where are they? Bring them to me. What rights are there today? Healthcare? You want good healthcare, you want a good doctor? You want to be healthy? Money. Education? You want a proper education and for your child not to be spat information at, hope for something to stick? It costs. You want good food, healthy. It costs. What, which rights?

The others responded similarly, focusing on mundane needs, and in particular on their entitlements as welfare reliant citizens, who realized that whenever it is time to materialize their entitlements they are required to prove again and again that they deserve them (e.g. Auyero, 2012). However, as we read through the transcripts and listened over and again to the recordings the picture seemed somewhat different. It was not that their repertoire of rights differed from that of the middle class. Rather, their path to materializing them required a different performance of citizenship (Isin, 2017). Analysing several legal cases that have reached the courts in both the USA and Israel, Peleg (2013) shows that what is considered mistakenly as a lack of voice of women in poverty is rather the absence of someone who

listens to them. In Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) both Dan and Katie try vainly to explain themselves in a civil manner and tone to the agents at the (outsourced) welfare agency. The rejection that they suffer is felt in their bodies, whether in sudden fatigue or malnutrition. Now think of Ronit, or Shlomit, or Daniel as teenagers or young women seeking help quietly and respectfully but being turned down over and over again. Being *civil* was unhelpful. If they wanted change and to make a home for themselves and for their children, they had to diversify their struggle and move from the personal to the public realm while exposing themselves and joining a collective of *strugglers* who seek, for themselves and for women in poverty at large, respectability and acknowledgement as radical, deserving citizens.

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