

**RESISTING OCCUPATION  
OR INSTITUTIONALIZING CONTROL?  
ISRAELI WOMEN AND PROTEST IN WEST BANK CHECKPOINTS**

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**Abstract**

Through a case study of Machsom Watch—a group of Israeli women activists who protest against the current national security policy in the West Bank by interposing themselves between their own army and the civilian Palestinian population living under military occupation there—the article assesses the extent to which civilian women who challenge military judgments in the midst of a bitter and prolonged national conflict can influence security policymaking. The paper demonstrates how the effectiveness of such a group is constrained by the national consensus that accords the army expert status on national security, and by the structure of political opportunity.

**Introduction**

The Napoleonic wars initiated the modern republican order in which citizens, in return for security, participate in the political and military ambitions of the nation-state, and in defense of country and nation (Clausewitz, 1993). In consequence, in national conflicts the divide between “us” and “them”—the enemy—is drawn in the boldest terms. In situations of protracted national conflict, this division is heightened, leading to accentuated patriotism, jingoism, and to militarization of various aspects of civilian life and culture. Indeed Enloe (2000) argues that almost all modern democratic societies are structurally and culturally militarized to one degree or another. This means that military values, needs, and presumptions are pervasive and integrated into routine daily lives.

Despite the cultural blurring of the lines between “government,” “army,” and “people,” however, in the age of mass democracy, directing foreign and national defense is still normally, perhaps necessarily, the responsibility of political elites and military professionals. Yet, since the 1950s with the erosion of the republican order in the West, the relationship between the state, army, and society has become more complex (Levy and Mizrahi, 2008, 5). The government, especially in democracies, may need to invest “a great deal of political effort ... into the legitimating of a particular war, producing

shifting and often contradictory public rationales for war making” (Roxborough, 1994, 630).

Very often, despite those efforts, there is dissent in which civil society demands a direct say in political decisionmaking on issues of war and peace. Dissidents in pacifist organizations, anti-armament, and antiwar movements in Europe and the U.S were active even before World War I. They voiced their opposition to governmental policies within this basic framework of division of labor between civil society, the army, and state professionals (Lofland, 1993; Alonso, 1993). When women are the protestors, such an assertion vis-à-vis the professionals is especially notable, considering the social division of labor along gender lines. As Ruddick (1989, 76) puts it, “War certainly seems to be men’s business.... Traditionally in most cultures it has been men’s lot to fight while women watch, suffer, applaud, ameliorate, and forgive.” This of course does not mean that women cannot be militaristic in their thinking. Militarization requires both men and women’s acquiescence. It means, says Enloe (2000, 3-4), that militarization privileges masculinity.

Under those assumptions regarding the connection between national conflicts, civil-society militarization, and gender, the question I raise is “Under what conditions, if any, will women in grassroots civil-society groups be able to influence security policy and mitigate the ‘us-them’ dichotomous view of the enemy?” The goal of this article is to assess the effectiveness of the largest Israeli women’s grassroots organization, Machsom Watch, which has tried to do just that.

### **Protesting and Resisting: Machsom Watch’s Activity**

Machsom (“checkpoint” in Hebrew) Watch is a nationwide Israeli women’s grassroots organization which, at its peak in 2004, numbered 400 members. It was founded in February 2001 by a group of five Jewish women in Jerusalem, three of them peace activists, who decided to go to the Bethlehem Checkpoint to see what was happening there with their own eyes (Keshet, 2006, 33-34). Within weeks they were joined by 30 women activists, who began to go in shifts to checkpoints in the Jerusalem area. A year later, due to media coverage, a group of some 200 organized themselves as a Tel Aviv branch to monitor checkpoints at the center of the West Bank. Thus, membership is acquired merely by volunteering to participate.

The group’s main activity is systematic and routine observation at military checkpoints in Jerusalem, and within the West Bank, and reporting that observation to the public and decisionmakers. The checkpoints are both frontier and military areas. What makes the West Bank a frontier is that 200,000 armed civilian Jewish settlers reside in the midst of 2.5 million Palestinians. It is a military area because, since October 2000, the rebellious Palestinians have been held down by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) through various military measures. The main measure has been a strict system of controls over

the freedom of movement between Palestinian towns and villages by a combination of a permit system, manned checkpoints, “flying checkpoints,” and physical obstacles such as road blocks, trenches, and “earth moles.” Since the spring of 2002, in order to be able to move around *within* the West Bank, all Palestinians need a permit, which the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) authorizes (Hass, 2006, xiii). The permit system bars Palestinian vehicles, totally or partially, from the new roads linking the Jewish settlements internally and with the pre-1967 territory of Israel, leaving only short minor roads available for Palestinians. Besides the human cost in terms of time, and the violation of their human dignity, the curtailment of freedom of movement has had implications for the Palestinians’ ability to live their lives—to earn their living, study, get medical treatment, and attend family and friendship events, such as weddings, festivals, and funerals (U.N. OCHA, 2005b, 2006b). Incidents of physical violence, harassment, and arbitrary behavior of soldiers towards the Palestinians have added to the banal, routine insults to the Palestinians’ human dignity.

Machsom Watch (MW) women go out to the checkpoints in daily shifts, morning and afternoon, and watch the treatment of the Palestinians by the soldiers. They position themselves close to the soldiers at their point of interaction with the Palestinians for two to four hours per shift. While observing the conduct of the soldiers toward the Palestinians, Watchers take notes and sometimes pictures, but also try to intervene on behalf of Palestinians. This involves approaching the soldiers and pointing out to them that something is being overlooked, ignored, or is inappropriate in some regard. If this does not help or is ignored, attempts are made to call higher military ranks, or special military officers who have a responsibility to take care of humanitarian problems, or the media, or members of the Knesset (Israel’s parliament). The written reports are careful to stress what has been directly witnessed, as opposed to what others—Palestinians or soldiers—say. The report is promptly posted on the group’s website. Many of those reports are “uneventful,” recording the distressing routine of the basic indignity imposed on the Palestinian population by the checkpoint regime. Brutality on the part of the soldiers is rare, and on a number of occasions when witnessed and reported by MW, has led to disciplinary action. But the banal indignity of soldiers shouting and screaming at the Palestinians at gunpoint to “stand in line” or “move back,” the total and arbitrary control over the mundane activities and the time of the Palestinians, and the bureaucratic harassment of the occupation regime is recorded in all reports. Monthly reports are sent to Knesset members, the media, and to world human-rights organizations. Meetings with army commanders and with law-enforcement agencies are held occasionally to raise specific issues regarding policy or to file complaints.

The purpose of this activity, as presented on the organization’s website is both political and humanitarian. The political purpose is to protest against the checkpoint policy arguing that, 1) its real purpose is to defend the Jewish settlements; 2) as collective punishment of the Palestinian population it is illegal and undermines future reconciliation between adversaries; and 3) the policy creates motivation for terror and is not effective in

preventing it. The humanitarian purpose is to try to ensure the protection of the Palestinians' civil and human rights by easing their passage, by mediating and helping them with the Israeli bureaucracy in their requests for medical treatment, and by submitting complaints of maltreatment.

MW has a "soft" rather than a radical feminist identity, which serves as an instrumental rationale for its activity as an organization of civil society. The group asserts that "our quiet but assertive presence at checkpoints is a direct challenge to the dominant militaristic discourse that prevails in Israeli society. It demands accountability on the part of the security forces towards the civilian estate" (Machsom Watch, n.d.). The group openly admits that its middle-class and middle-aged collective identity is part of its strategy of protest. (Young women are warmly received, but in practice form a minority.) Thus, the organization describes itself on its website as comprising "a wide spectrum of ages and backgrounds, with a definite bias towards mature, professional women" (Machsom Watch, n.d.). All members are Israeli. MW has no broad ideological platform or even a vision of a "peace plan" outlining the desired solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It describes itself only as "politically pluralistic within the context of opposition to the occupation and a commitment to human rights" (Machsom Watch, n.d.). The only common political goal is to end the occupation, and the medium-range goal is to stop the policy of curtailment of freedom of movement of the Palestinians.

In sum, the activities of MW are witnessing, collecting data, and humanitarian intervention as a form of political protest. The reports that appear on the organization's website, the protocols of the organizations' meetings, the e-mail discussions and reports on the listserv of the members from 2003 to 2006, and my participant observation as a member between spring 2003 and summer 2005 form the data with which I address the question "Has MW been effective?" The article's next section discusses the tools used to analyze outcomes and assessing effectiveness of social movements. Then I proceed to contextualize the MW case and to apply the criteria chosen for assessing effectiveness. The article concludes by revisiting the criteria for effectiveness, particularly in cases pertaining to issues of war and peace.

### **Tools for Assessing Protest Outcomes**

In order to assess the activity of MW and explain its outcomes, I first draw on Gamson's classic work on effectiveness of protest groups (1990) and, second, on the framework of political opportunity structure (Tarrow, 1994, 1996). Gamson's typology became a building block for researchers who followed, while refining his concepts. Political opportunity structure (POS) is the most comprehensive framework for analysis currently used for explaining conditions for the emergence and sustainability of protest activity as a sign of conflict with and disaffection from institutional politics.

These tools are embedded in my analysis in the following way: First, the two criteria of success suggested by Gamson are employed: The first is acceptance or recognition of the challenging group by its antagonists (i.e., the targets of protest/lobbying) “as a valid spokesman for a legitimate set of interests” (Gamson 1990, 28). “Antagonists” in this case includes policymakers (civilian and military) and the mainstream media as conduits between public opinion and decisionmakers. The second criterion is whether the group’s beneficiary has gained “new advantages” or favorable policy changes. The group’s beneficiary in this case is the Palestinian civilian population in the West Bank, and the benefits are their freedom of movement between Palestinian localities. A more general “new advantage” would be mitigating the us-them dichotomous and hierarchical view of the Palestinians by mainstream Israeli public opinion.

Second, the outcomes of interaction between MW and the decision makers and the media, are analyzed with reference to Gamson’s typology of outcomes. Gamson (1990, 29) hypothesized four ideal types of outcomes of the clash between challengers and the targets in terms of the latter’s response: full response to the group’s demands for policy change, total collapse of the group (possibly by repression), cooptation of the group (by rewarding only the leaders), and preemption of its demands by the authorities without acknowledging the group. Based on the study of MW’s experience I suggest that Gamson’s original binary variables in the typology should be modified to broaden the range of outcomes. Thus, the introduction of an intermediate outcome in the formerly dichotomous categories of “New Advantages” and “Acceptance/Recognition” yields at least one other outcome category—*manipulation* (Figure 1). Unlike “cooptation,” which refers to the “buying off” of leaders with no advantages to their intended beneficiaries, “manipulation” refers to the distortion of the group’s goals. It is done by *appearing* to grant some advantages to the group’s beneficiaries, while in fact, subjecting them to a disadvantage.

Figure 1: Protest Groups’ Effectiveness and Outcomes

		Acceptance/Recognition		
		Full	Some	None
New Advantages	Many	Full Response		Preemption
	Some		Manipulation	
	None	Cooptation		Collapse

Adapted from Gamson, 1990

Finally, a refined version of the POS framework is utilized to *explain* the outcome in this case study. The original POS framework lumped conditions for emergence and sustainability of protest activity together with protest effectiveness. For example, Tarrow defined political opportunity structures as features of the regime that function as “signals”

to activists and “provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.” (Tarrow, 1994, 85) Thus defined, if a change of policy demanded by the protesters comes about, it is difficult to assess whether it resulted from the group’s own actions or from the POS—for example, the presence of powerful political actors within the institutional system who favored, or did not oppose, the outcomes anyway (Lofland, 1985, 204-205). Meyer and Minkoff (2004) express a consensus among the next generation of POS researchers when they state that in order to tackle the problem, the research should be sensitive to the question “political opportunity for whom?” and “political opportunity for what?” Kriesi and his associates indeed found that across Western Europe, national defense is a “high profile” policy domain that is typically considered by political powerholders to be their own. Peace movements tend to be depicted as “anti-national,” supporting the interests of the enemy, and are therefore considered threatening by both the authorities and the public. It is not surprising therefore, that Kriesi and his associates found that peace movements encounter a “closed” structure of opportunity, “even when its political friends are in power” (Kriesi et al., 1995, 107).

### **Peace Activism and Gender in Israel: Historical Context**

Applying the POS approach to the protest activity in Israel, Hermann argued that in the 1970s and 1980s the POS was generally “ripe” for protesters on issues of national security (i.e., they were tolerated by the political elite), but more so for groups that are on the “Right” or hawkish end of the political spectrum than for those on the “Left,” dovish end. Even the adoption of the Left-leaning policy expressed by the signing of the Oslo Declaration of Principles of 1993 with the Palestinian Liberation Organization was related more to the Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) of the late 1980s and early 1990s than to Israeli protest activity (Hermann, 1996). Hence, what has become evident in Israel’s political culture of the last three decades is a causal link between protest and security policy: Since 1974, armed conflict has generated grassroots protest activity against the government’s national-security policies.

Women and women’s organizations were prominent in the surge of protests that followed the outbreak of the *intifada* in late 1987. Chazan (1991, 298) reports that women comprised about 50 percent of the membership of the 170 peace and protest groups, and pro-peace parties that sprang up in Israel in the late 1980s. Mixed and all-women groups, some mainstream and some more radical regarding peace terms, engaged in a variety of protest activities: supplying food convoys and legal and humanitarian aid to the Palestinians, symbolic actions and protest against the Israeli government, and lobbying decisionmakers for policy change. Sasson-Levy (1994) notes the prominence of women in many of the anti-occupation groups of the period that were most radical in terms of the political solutions with the Palestinians. Sharoni (1995) points to the fact

that all-women feminist groups took the lead in unequivocally supporting talking to the PLO and terminating the occupation. Such groups were also the first to expose and publicize the hardships of life under military occupation, to defend the rights of Palestinian women prisoners, and to express solidarity by meeting with Palestinian women.

How should the prominence of women in protest groups be explained? All three researchers mentioned above suggest that the explanation is on the one hand related to gender inequality in Israeli society, and on the other to the civilian character of the Palestinian uprising and its human costs. This relationship is best exemplified by Women in Black, the most original and persistent group in terms of its mode of protest. The group was active from 1988 to 1994, originally in Jerusalem and then in 25 other locations in Israel as well as abroad. The movement initiated in Israel a new and original form of non-violent protest—a silent Friday vigil at noon of women dressed in black to signify the tragedy of the two nations, at busy urban intersections. The women held banners and occasionally gave flyers to drivers and passersby, advocating an end to the occupation and to the Israeli-Palestinian cycle of violence. The political significance of this action stemmed from the reactions of and interaction with the hostile involuntary “audience,” particularly passing male taxi drivers, who cursed the protesters with sexist remarks. Helman and Rapoport (1997) argue that by asserting silently their non-conformist opinions and presence in the public arena, Women in Black symbolically challenged the gender inequality that excludes women from the public national security discourse, and the national hierarchy of Jews (“us”) and the controlled Palestinian enemy (“them”).

The dissipation of the peace protest movement, including the women’s groups in Israel by the mid-1990s and the low impact of these activities *on policy* has been explained by several factors: lack of legitimacy in the society at large for linking anti-militaristic and anti-sexist agendas (Chazan, 1991); lack of true radicalism in practice of the activists (Sasson-Levi, 1994); and the demise of the political opportunity structure presented by events following the 1991 Gulf war and the Labor party’s victory in the 1992 elections (Sharoni, 1995). From 1997 to 2000 a small grassroots women’s group, Four Mothers—Leaving Lebanon in Peace, scored a huge success in creating the momentum for a pullout of Israel’s troops from southern Lebanon. But on the Israeli-Palestinian front, as Oslo’s implementation faltered from 1996 to 1999, mass protest activity was not rejuvenated. Ironically, this was partly because public opinion blamed the dovish Peace Now movement for having created the misleading impression that the Palestinians were ready for peace (Hermann, 2005, 8). Following the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Camp David in 2000 and the outbreak of the second *intifada*, even the Labor party legitimized this interpretation, and the anti-Oslo Likud party returned to power in 2001. In terms of the POS approach, opportunities for effective protest in the name of reconciliation with the Palestinians had vanished. In Gamson’s terms of movement outcomes, after having been pre-empted by the politicians in Oslo, the largest peace protest group, Peace Now, either collapsed or was coopted.

But in view of the link between armed conflict with the Palestinians and protest in Israel, it is not surprising that grassroots peace protest activity, specifically by women, emerged after the outbreak of second Palestinian uprising in October 2000. Among the new generation of activist organizations, nine women's organizations were at the forefront, joined under the umbrella of The Coalition of Women for Peace (Coalitziat Nashim Le'shalom). Machsom Watch is one of those women's voluntary grassroots organizations and has the largest number of activists. However, the POS approach would not predict that such activity would have any effect on policy, given that nothing in the political opportunity structure has changed. With this expectation in the background, the article examines the effectiveness and outcomes of MW's activity in the period from 2003 to 2006.

My argument regarding the effectiveness of MW protest activities is as follows:

1) MW achieved partial acceptance by its targets in this descending order: the military, the politicians, and public opinion through the media. Hence, it can be considered partly effective by this criterion. However,

2) MW gained only partial new advantages for the Palestinians at the checkpoints. Furthermore, those partial new advantages helped institutionalize the checkpoint system, which undercut the group's main objective. Hence, the outcome of the protest activity was manipulation of the group's goals by military decisionmakers.

3) The case of MW suggests that the effectiveness of women's grassroots peace protest requires first, a challenge by the group to the military's expertise and its monopoly on security information, preferably by shadowing its presence on the ground. Second, it requires an opening in the political opportunity structure, which otherwise tends to be closed for civilians on matters of national security.

### **Success Criterion I: Acceptance/ Recognition**

The criterion of acceptance of a group as a valid spokesman for a legitimate set of interests is a cluster that includes consultations, negotiations, and inclusion of the protest group in some way in the policy discourse of decisionmakers (Rochon and Mazmainian, 1993, 84-85). According to Gamson (1990, 28-32), one of the strong tests of acceptance is meeting and consulting with the protest group at the initiative of the authoritative target body.

#### *Acceptance by the Military*

From 2003 to 2006, several meetings took place between MW representatives and military authorities regarding the violation of rights of the Palestinians at the checkpoints. In 2005 alone at least seven meetings took place with different police chiefs and army area commanders of the Jerusalem and the central and northern West Bank. In 2006,



there were three meetings. A close examination of the content of the meetings shows that within two years the “advocacy” character of MW activity increasingly earned the status of “expert opinion,” particularly in the eyes of the middle-ranking army officers directly responsible for the checkpoints. The series of face-to-face exchanges and indirect contact through MW’s reports effectively gave MW input into military policymaking. In this sense, this contact could be described as inclusion in the policy discourse.

Most of the meetings with these middle-level officers were at the initiative of MW in order to bring up issues relating to specific checkpoints (e.g., complaints about the behavior of specific units’ soldiers towards the Palestinians, conditions at the checkpoint, opening hours, and so forth). However, five of the meetings were at the initiative of the military authorities and some were conducted in an atmosphere of a dialogue between two equal sides. Two meetings were with army chiefs of staff.

The weight that the MW women’s words carried in those meetings was due to the expertise they had developed while standing at the checkpoints. The continuity in the reports exposed the trends and patterns of the army’s practices and made it difficult to excuse banal incidents of humiliation as aberrations. In those meetings, time and again MW pointed out that the official policy was contradicted by what MW had observed in practice. Detailed complaints concerning rights violations and violations of army regulations were filed and sent with copies to the army’s chief solicitor. On top of the detailed accounts contained in the reports, special inquiries were undertaken by members of MW which exposed the bureaucratic harassment of the Palestinians in their efforts to get permits (Ziv, 2004; Machsom Watch, 2007). In the course of those meetings, the officers repeatedly acknowledged that they read the MW reports and some admitted that they learned from them, although they rejected the political interpretations and the tone attached to the reports. The exchange often took on the character of MW demanding answers and accountability from the area commanders for discrepancies between the stated policy and the practice on the ground, or for regulations which did not make sense.

Matters were somewhat different when it came to the meetings with top-ranking officers. Nevertheless, even those meetings attest to recognition of MW as a legitimate public voice on the checkpoints issue. Here, MW women were lectured and eventually constrained, rather than consulted. In essence, this was the character of the two meetings that took place with the two succeeding army chiefs of staff in summer 2004 and spring 2006. Both meetings followed incidents involving MW women. The 2004 meeting followed a number of physical assaults on MW women by counter-protest groups composed of right-wing activists (“Women in Blue and White,” who were accompanied by men) and by radical West Bank settlers (Machsom Watch, 2004, 68-70). MW women were alarmed at the slack and ineffective reaction of police and soldiers in coming to their aid, and managed to arrange a meeting with the chief of staff. After the meeting, the army spokesman confirmed that “the Chief of Staff listened to the difficulties which women of MW encountered and explained the complexity and the dilemmas the soldiers at the checkpoints face.” MW stated in response that “we do not see this meeting as an

achievement but as *recognition* of us as an organization and of our struggle” (Bukhbut, 2004).

The March 2006 meeting with the next chief of staff followed a MW report that was faxed to the chief of staff, area commanders, and a number of members of parliament. The report documented how the soldiers at the Hawara checkpoint on the eve of a Muslim holiday had used their control over the freedom of movement of the Palestinians to punish them collectively for an earlier incident. The reaction of the military to this report was quite extraordinary and swift: A fact-finding committee was nominated, which asked MW to give its testimony. In addition, the chief of staff himself came along with the area commanders to inspect the checkpoint a week after the events. Two months later, MW representatives were invited to meet with the chief of staff. At the meeting the chief of staff stated that the army took MW reports seriously and that there were army personnel whose task was to read the reports and handle the complaints included in them. However, the bottom line of his message was that MW women’s intervention on the scene was disturbing the soldiers. Hence, the soldiers from now on were instructed not to talk to MW women or to respond to the women’s requests. The women were now required to keep a certain distance from the soldiers. He warned that any attempt to talk to the soldiers would be interpreted as an unlawful disturbance and the soldiers were authorized to call the police. In other words, by 2006, the military exercised its power to limit MW’s activity significantly.

### *Acceptance by Legislators and Law-Enforcement Bodies*

At the same time as its standing was confirmed by the army, MW also achieved recognition as a bona fide human-rights organization by law-enforcement bodies and the Knesset. Early in 2004, MW women met with the State General Solicitor’s office to discuss the harsh humanitarian implications of the planned “Separation Wall,” particularly for the Palestinians in Jerusalem area, and found them very attentive. A year later, MW participated at a meeting with representatives of two other human-rights organizations and the deputy to the solicitor general and his inter-departmental committee for enforcement of Israeli law in the Occupied Territories. The deputy to the solicitor general declined to discuss links between the army and the settlers regarding the Palestinians, but did agree to accept specific complaints. The army’s chief solicitor met with MW in January 2005 and later, in the Knesset, had nothing but praise for the group’s activity as “Helping us to know things that we wouldn’t know without them” (*Knesset Protocols*, 2005a [22 February 2005]). In the Knesset, a number of members, mainly from the small Left-liberal Meretz party adopted MW’s cause and acted as its representative, when MW was attacked by right-wing members (*Knesset Protocols*, 2005b [9 February 2005]). MW is also invited regularly to appear before the Knesset Committee for Constitution, Bills, and Law at the semi-annual hearing on “Preserving human rights in the framework of the War on Terror,” in which the army’s chief solicitor

reports to the committee. For instance in the meeting on 22 February 2005, MW appeared alongside three other human-rights organizations and one right-wing women's organization (Women in Green) that demanded the opportunity to testify against MW activity. MW's main demand of the committee was to exercise civilian supervision over the GSS's denial of permits to Palestinians. This was not ruled out by the chairman of the committee, but eventually was not taken up (*Knesset Protocols*, 2005a [22 February 2005]).

### *Acceptance by the Media and Public*

From the outset, the belief of MW women was that through its "witnessing" activity, they would shake mainstream, middle-of-the-road public opinion from its denial and refusal to see what is actually done in its name to the Palestinian population. The following examination of its impact on the public arena reveals a mixed picture of effectiveness: The group raised the public awareness, but did not achieve the desired impact.

The Israeli media, which voices mainly mainstream opinions, began to show an interest in the presence of the checkpoints at the beginning of 2002, after six soldiers were killed by a Palestinian sniper at a checkpoint. As a by-product of the public debate on the military's failure to protect the soldiers, a narrow opening was created for more radical voices questioning the necessity of the checkpoints. That same year MW women were interviewed for the first time on two television channels. (The international press also became interested early on as part of its coverage of Israeli military policy.) The initial interaction of the media with the MW women who were interviewed was quite hostile on both channels, with the technicians of public Channel 1 even wanting to stop the live broadcast (Keshet, 2006, 132, 135). But from 2003 to 2004, the legitimacy of MW's protest was enhanced in the eyes of the public following the publication of official reports on improper behavior of soldiers at the checkpoints. The army's prosecutor himself reported that in 2003, 730 investigations were launched concerning behavioral aberrations by soldiers against Palestinians, mostly at the checkpoints (*Knesset Protocols*, 2005a [22 February 2005]).

Thus, growing public concern over the impact of the *intifada* on the soldiers, as well as over the tarnishing of the army's image, led to increased exposure of MW's activity. In particular, a report on MW in the weekend magazine of the most widely circulated daily (*Yediot Aharonot*, 21 November 2003) made a strong public impact, leading to a rush of new women volunteers to the organization. However, as analyzed by Keshet (2006, 132, 145), coverage of MW in the mainstream paper "domesticated" the women volunteers of MW and depoliticized their message. They were portrayed as do-gooders and "humanitarian grandmothers," rather than as critical political activists. A minority in the media did see them as political: A right-wing columnist described MW as dangerous "lesbian Marxist grandmothers," who might impair the ability of the army to

make hard decisions. The small number of left-wing voices in the elite print media (mainly in the daily *Ha'aretz*) credited the organization for informative reporting and gave its activity a political frame. So did the host of the popular Channel 2 television news program in prime time, who invited a MW representative to respond to the minister of defense's announcement concerning stiff new measures at checkpoints. This public exposure was partly the result of a November 2004 incident in which a Palestinian violinist was forced to play before a soldier at the checkpoint, which was videorecorded by MW and circulated in the world media (*Ha'aretz*, 30 November 2004). In Israel this image recalled images of Jews in the Holocaust and created a public stir. Public exposure also resulted from the quite successful first press conference MW held in June 2005 to publicize its 2004 report. The conference was well attended by local and foreign press and legitimized MW as a source of information for news media, beyond the small number of critical journalists for whom it was already a source (Keshet, 2006, 135-137). It can be argued that by 2005, after four years of activity, the checkpoints as a humanitarian issue had been put on the public agenda and MW had become the civilian body most identified in the public eye with this cause.

As a protest group, however, MW sensed that its political message was not getting through widely enough. It therefore decided "to bring the checkpoints to Tel Aviv" and organized a photo exhibition of pictures taken at the checkpoints by MW women. The exhibition, titled "Endless Checkpoints," opened in Tel Aviv in February 2006 in the presence of the British Ambassador, who had donated money for its financing. Due to the exhibition's charged political message, it took a whole year to find a location willing to host it. The exhibition received good coverage in the international and Israeli media, but it appeared that the already receptive public, rather the targeted general public, actually came to view the photos.

Indeed, the attempt to move the exhibition from the country's center to Beer Sheva in the south encountered strong opposition. The Mayor of Beer Sheva, an ex-Air Force Lieutenant General, managed to bar the exhibition from municipal venues, arguing that it was "political" and that it offended the feeling of bereaved families. MW both demonstrated and went to court on the grounds of freedom of expression and lost in the local administrative court and then in Israel's Supreme Court. The exhibition finally opened at a non-municipal venue.

The fierce opposition to MW from right-wing counter-groups also attests to its growing public impact. On the academic-intellectual front, the right-leaning "NGO-Monitor" website includes MW in its campaign to end the practice of "self-declared 'humanitarian NGOs' exploiting the label 'universal human rights values' to promote politically and ideologically motivated anti-Israel agendas." Opposition by political and other means was encountered from Women in Green, which has been active since 1993 in opposing the Oslo Agreement (Mattar, 2006). MW was surprised and some women were traumatized by physical and verbal intimidation used by Jewish settlers and by

“Women in Blue,” which is associated with the ruling Likud party. Such attacks became frequent in 2004 (Machsom Watch, 2004, 67-70).

The radical Right’s use of violence against MW women partly stemmed from its frustration at the change of public mood against their annexationist position. But the shift in public opinion with regard to the territorial solution did not change the public’s lack of empathy for the enemy. The consensus view remained that the Palestinians had brought their hardships upon themselves by rejecting the solution at Camp David and by launching the terror campaign in Israeli cities. While the checkpoints had apparently been recognized as a problem, the majority of Jewish popular opinion supported the military’s position that checkpoints were essential for security. In a poll taken in May 2006, 75 percent thought soldiers serving at the checkpoints faced difficult moral dilemmas; however, 90 percent associated the word “checkpoints” with soldiers stopping a terrorist on his way to commit an act of terror, and 87 percent believed this was what the checkpoints were for. MW has also failed to draw to the public’s attention to the location of most of the checkpoints: Only 33 percent of respondents knew that the majority of the checkpoints stop Palestinians from moving between their own towns and villages within the West Bank and not between the West Bank and Israel proper (*Dahaf Poll*, 22 May 2006). Nevertheless, it may be to the credit of MW that, despite those associations and beliefs, a significant minority, 39.5 percent, supported a reduction in the number of checkpoints and a more flexible policy towards travel limitations on the Palestinian population, while a small majority of 52 percent of the Jewish population opposed it (*Peace Index*, April 2006).

### **Success Criterion II: Policy Changes**

The second criterion for evaluating a protest group’s success is the extent to which it manages to gain “new advantages” for its beneficiaries during the challenge and its aftermath (Gamson, 1990, 34-37). The cluster of indicators for the policy-change criterion includes responsiveness to the group’s agenda through enactment of legislation or regulation, or incorporation of the group’s representatives into the policymaking process (Rochon and Mazmainian, 1993, 77).

The main goal of MW was to bring about a change in the policy of internal closures in the West Bank which curbing Palestinians’ freedom of movement. A secondary, short-term goal was to introduce sensitivity to the human dignity of the Palestinians into conduct by the young soldiers, despite the difficult setting of violent conflict. By 2006 it became clear that the primary change that MW sought had not been effected.

In the parliamentary arena, MW’s rather sporadic efforts to recruit effective support for the cause yielded little. The one Knesset member who adopted the cause had no political clout. The group’s potential allies, the liberal-Left parties, at best provided

protection against attacks from the radical right. MW's push to create effective parliamentary supervision of the GSS's massive blacklisting of mostly young Palestinians, who are denied the magnetic cards and travel permits for unknown and unexplained reasons, failed. Particularly disappointing was the interaction with two Knesset members on the left side of the political map who were former high-ranking military officers turned politicians. When MW appealed to them for help, once for Palestinians stuck in a distant checkpoint and once to inspect the conditions at another checkpoint, they were completely uncritical of the checkpoints themselves and empathetic toward the army's needs. Furthermore, in a visit to a checkpoint at the invitation of MW, one of them was impressed with the "improvements" at the checkpoints, which he credited, alas, to MW's efforts. Even MW's appeal to the Arab-Palestinian Knesset members to act with regard to the harassment at the checkpoints of Arab-Palestinian Israeli citizens returning from family visits during the holidays, was without result.

Most of MW's efforts to change policy were directed at the army itself, which is the official sovereign body in the Occupied Territories. It is also the only accessible security agency, since the GGS is a clandestine body. Despite MW's efforts to effect a change in the policy, the main manned checkpoints that were in existence in 2001 have, to date, remained in place (U.N. OCHA, 2007). In the period from March 2003 to summer 2005 it seemed as if the policy was changing in the direction MW intended: There was a slight decrease in the number of manned checkpoints and a significant drop of 48 percent in the total number of physical obstacles, including earth mounds, earth walls, trenches, and unmanned roadblocks (U.N. OCHA, 2005b, 2006b). Furthermore, from the end of 2004 to the middle of 2005 there was an easing of the closure policy in several areas of the West Bank, enabling travel from villages which had been effectively separated for three years from their surrounding towns.

But MW's activity probably did not play a significant part, if any, in this temporary change in policy. It is more likely that the decision was related to two international factors: first, the deliberations of the International Court at The Hague on the Separation Wall in February 2004, which was expected to draw international criticism of Israel's policy in the Occupied Territories; second, an uneasiness within the U.S. State Department over the issue of continued building of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, despite the Bush administration's "Road Map." Furthermore, the trend toward easing the closure ended in summer 2005 when the disengagement from the Gaza Strip was implemented. The use of flying checkpoints (temporary roadblocks) to bar Palestinians from the main roads intensified, and movement of Palestinians from one region to another was cut off. The combination of the permit system and checkpoints effectively cut the West Bank into three sections and a number of enclaves within those sections (U.N. OCHA, 2006c).

However, during 2003 the management of checkpoints changed quite noticeably. Passage through the manned checkpoints of Nablus and Tulkarem was made easier due to

extended opening hours and the easing of pedestrian checking (U.N. OCHA, 2005c) . New regulations on the treatment of the Palestinians at the checkpoints were issued, disallowing various practices: Soldiers were not allowed to punish Palestinians at the checkpoint for “disobedience” by detaining them in a penned-in area for hours or by confiscating their ID cards, their car keys, and vehicles (often applied to taxi drivers). Before being assigned to the checkpoints, soldiers received special training with regard to codes of behavior and use of force. An Arabic-speaking officer was assigned to the main checkpoints in order to facilitate communication in case of humanitarian problems. An army Humanitarian Hotline was set up to give immediate humanitarian relief.

It seems safe to conclude that the introduction of regulations which ease somewhat the checkpoint regime were a direct result of constant complaints by MW to the army and of local “negotiations” between MW and the area commanders. An official letter sent to MW from the office of the West Bank Military Solicitor, affirms that as a result of MW complaint at a meeting with the Military Solicitor, “the wording of the regulations have been changed making clear that it is absolutely forbidden to stop people as a punishment” (16 February 2006 letter on Machsom Watch listserv). The same army general solicitor at the hearing at the Knesset confirmed that part of the changes at the checkpoints, which he termed as “improvements,” resulted from MW’s raising the issue (*Knesset Protocols*, 2005a [22 February 2005]).

Has MW been effective in fulfilling its secondary goal of improving conditions, including safeguarding the human dignity of those having to use the checkpoints? Ostensibly, the answer is positive: The physical conditions in the main manned checkpoints indeed changed quite significantly in 2003. Overhead roofs, electricity, and water were installed. At the main manned checkpoints, laptop computers were introduced with links to the GSS’s list of those “wanted” or barred from free passage. This capability shortened significantly the waiting time of those who were subject to further checking by soldiers. But, in fact, the area of the checkpoint became, as the army termed it, “sterile,” which associated it even more with the threat of terror and violence. Metal turnstiles, controlled remotely by a soldier a few meters away, force the Palestinians to approach the soldiers one at a time, and they are often trapped in the turnstile, as if in a cage. Taxis and buses can unload their passengers only at a distance from the checkpoint, and pedestrians must carry their belongings on foot. At the checkpoints that are considered border crossings into Israel, such as Qalandia in Jerusalem, the system of remote checking through camera control is even more “sterile” and impersonal.

Many of those changes were recommended in the summer of 2004 by an unpublished report of the Defense Ministry special committee on Checkpoint Passes and the Separation Wall. The report states that the army’s image was suffering as a consequence of improper, unethical, and inconsistent behavior by soldiers at the checkpoints; improper physical conditions; and understaffed crews. In other words, the factual picture that MW reports had portrayed was adopted in full by the Defense

Ministry report. The head of the committee was a high-ranking ex-officer who initiated three meetings with MW, during which it became clear that the MW reports were read by him and his staff. However, the practical conclusions drawn from that picture by the army were exactly the opposite of MW's goals—that the checkpoints should be *institutionalized*, and that some, the “border crossings,” should be run by a private security organization. Such a step would make them even less accountable to grassroots organizations.

In sum, it seems that MW's activity vis-à-vis the army regarding change of policy yielded a paradoxical result—it contributed to institutionalization of the checkpoints rather than to their demise. The security apparatus rejected MW's overall argument that the checkpoints themselves posed a security risk because of their degrading and devastating effect on the lives of the Palestinians. In terms of Gamson's modified typology, the army leadership partly legitimated MW—as watchers, but not participants in security-policy discourse. It will be interesting to follow the impact of a policy paper by ex-military officers in early 2008, which repeats MW's arguments concerning how the checkpoints increase, rather than decrease, security risks (*Ha'aretz*, 12 February 2008).

The army therefore accepted MW's demand that it take into account some of the basic human needs of the Palestinians at the checkpoints; however, it did so only with regard to physical conditions which also made the checkpoints more efficient. In the process of accepting selectively MW's demands for change, the army turned the desired goal of winning “new advantages” for the Palestinians into continuing and perhaps more deeply entrenched “disadvantage.”

### **Political Opportunity Structure and Effectiveness**

MW's relative success in drawing attention of decisionmakers and the public to the checkpoint policy was likely due to two factors: the women's social capital and mode of protest, and the brief “window of opportunity” within the otherwise closed political opportunity structure for protesters on the Left. The Watchers' social capital refers to their middle-class background, which provided them with articulation and communication capabilities, as well as access to high-ranking officers. The short window of opportunity was the political policy vacuum created by the post-Oslo deadlock after October 2000, and following the bloody round of suicide bombings and massive retaliatory attacks during the re-occupation of the West Bank from March to May 2002. The ruling Sharon coalition did not present a blueprint for dealing politically with the Palestinian conflict. Meanwhile, in 2002-2003, the policy vacuum was being filled by two competing elite-led dovish conflict-resolution initiatives that gathered mass support (the “Geneva Initiative” and the “People's Voice”). This internal pressure coincided with growing international criticism of the Separation Wall. Under these conditions, and in the absence of a clear political strategy from the highest political echelons, the army was



particularly sensitive to allegations of maltreatment of the Palestinians. MW's special mode of protest—witnessing and direct involvement in alleviating the hardships of the civilian Palestinian population at the checkpoints—challenged military expertise. It resulted in MW having access to officers of all ranks and some success in mitigating the “us-them” dichotomy in the eyes of the Israeli public. I therefore suggest that the explanation for MW's partial and temporary effectiveness—i.e., their acceptance by decisionmakers and official toleration of their presence at the checkpoints for about 24 months—is explained by this political context on the one hand, and by their mode of protest on the other.

However, this toleration was abruptly curtailed with the change in the structure of political opportunity. By December 2003, Prime Minister Sharon finally counteracted the peace initiatives by airing his unilateral Disengagement Plan from Gaza. The implications of his strategy for the West Bank were not spelled out to the Israeli public. But by the end of 2004 the new policy was becoming obvious to human-rights grassroots organizations, among them MW. Under the rubric of the “war on terror,” along with the Separation Wall, the West Bank was being fragmented, with an increase in heavy-handed limitation of the Palestinians' mobility, as part of a unilateral attempt to redraw Israel's borders. From the army's point of view, the two years in which MW women were free to interpose themselves between the soldiers and the enemy (i.e., the Palestinian population) were now over. New regulations, restrictions, complaints to the police against Watchers and steps to curtail their direct intervention at the checkpoints were put in place. The activity of witnessing and reporting is still carried out at the checkpoints and also in a new venue—military courts where Palestinians are brought in for arraignment on a mass scale. But the group's impact on decisionmakers and public opinion has waned, and so has the enthusiasm of many of the activists, some of whom have looked for other ways to intervene in the conflict.

## Conclusions

The case of MW's protest activity provides another indication of the obstacles that grassroots organizations face when they try to challenge national-security policy in times of conflict. The prevailing militaristic “us-them” discourse is especially exclusionary for women who use an empathetic, inclusive, and reconciliatory discourse towards the enemy. Furthermore, in such a case, grassroots organizations' adversaries are extremely powerful—the executive branch, the military, and the security agencies, all of which have overwhelming power to draw a picture of “reality” for the public. Under those conditions, being effective or, in Gamson's terms, achieving “full response,” requires quite exceptional circumstances.

But MW activity did, for a while, have some impact on policy and some mitigating influence on the “us-them” view of the Palestinians by Israeli public opinion.

MW's partial and temporary effectiveness was due to the women's social capital, their unique mode of protest, and a window of political opportunity. But the paradoxical outcome of this activity—manipulation of the group's goals—indicates the limitations of such grassroots activism, and also points to limitations of Gamson's typology. Hence, the article suggests that the typology be modified to include partial achievements on both the criteria of "acceptance" and of winning "new advantages." This modification allows for conceptualization of additional outcomes of protest activity, only one of which was the subject of this article—manipulation of the group's goals, as distinct from mere cooptation of the group's leadership. Developing the other possible theoretical outcomes within the modified typology will also help address the need to distinguish between the short-term and long-term outcomes of social protest.

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