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Women's rights are on a sharp decline in Israel. Advocates blame Netanyahu's far-right government

4 HR AGO

By  Tal Shalev

Protesters supporting women's rights attend a demonstration in Tel Aviv on February 20, 2023, ...



Jerusalem — They called themselves the “Women in Red.” Dressed in crimson robes and white caps, they marched with faces downturned in silent protest against **Israel’s government** in the year before the **war in Gaza**. Borrowing imagery from Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel “The Handmaid’s Tale,” the group meant to sound an alarm: the government’s judicial overhaul threatened to undo decades of progress on women’s rights.

Three years later, what the government dismissed as theatrical exaggeration is increasingly viewed as prescient foreshadowing. Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**'s right-wing government, which relies upon the support of ultra-Orthodox parties, is moving Israel toward a more religious and conservative future.

Alongside broader efforts to weaken the Supreme Court – long the cornerstone of Israeli women's equality – have come specific threats to women's rights.

Netanyahu's religious partners have pushed bills expanding religious authority over civil life, including gender segregation in cultural events and education. With the power to collapse Netanyahu's government should they withdraw their support, the religious parties have been able to bend the secular prime minister to their will.

The decline in women's rights is measurable. Israel's global standing on gender equality has plunged in recent years. In the 2025–26 Women, Peace and Security Index, produced by Georgetown University, Israel ranks 84 of 181 countries – behind Albania, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. Before the current government came into power three years ago, it ranked 27.

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The precipitous drop parallels a sharp decline in women's representation in public life. Today, only six of Israel's 33 ministers are women and few have senior roles. The current government has not made a single permanent appointment of a woman as director-general across over 30 ministries. No woman currently heads a major political party, and Netanyahu's coalition includes two parties that have zero women on their lists.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks at the 80th session of The United Nations General Assembly on September 26. (*Alexi J. Rosenfeld/Getty Images*)

“The deterioration in Israel’s gender equality ranking is unprecedented, placing us in the lower half of countries worldwide – a stark contrast to decades in which Israel ranked among the leaders and was known as a pioneer in advancing women’s rights,” said Daphna Hacker of Tel Aviv University’s Faculty of Law and Gender Studies.

Hacker ticked off a list of historical accomplishments for women’s equality in Israel: the 1951 Equal Rights for Women Law, considered revolutionary at the time; Golda Meir serving as one of the first female leaders in the world in 1969; the military’s mandatory **conscription of women**.

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But Hacker, who also serves as the chair of the Israel Women's Network, said women are now "virtually absent" from key decisions. "There's no doubt women's status has waned in recent years," she said. "We've never experienced such a backlash."

One bill under debate at Israel's parliament, the Knesset, which could be finalized in the coming weeks, would dramatically expand the authority of state-run religious courts to handle civil disputes. These courts, staffed exclusively by men who rule according to Jewish law, already oversee marriage and divorce proceedings, including for secular couples. Under the proposed legislation, they would gain power to rule on financial disputes, business matters, and potentially child custody issues.

"This bill seeks to place women's fate in the hands of a religious judiciary that inherently discriminates against them," said Bonot Alternativa, the women's protest group that once led the Women in Red. "We will not allow the government to force us into marriage with a system that despises us," it said in a statement while its members protested as gagged brides in chains outside a rabbinical court in Tel Aviv earlier this month.

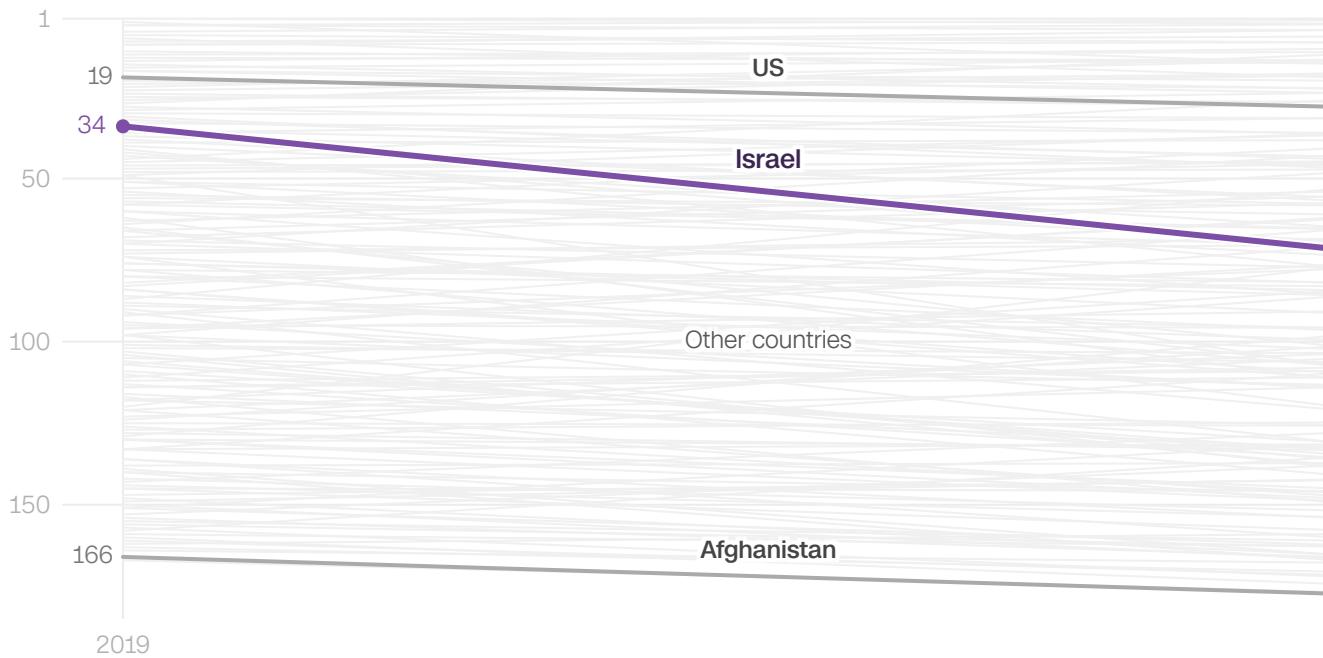
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CNN has reached to Israel's Ministry for Social Equality for comment.

Gender equality in Israel has slipped in recent years

In 2019, Israel ranked 34 out of 166 countries included in the Women, Peace and Security Index (WPS Index). In 2025, that dropped to 84 out of 181.

WPS Index countries and ranks, 2019 and 2025



Note: Some countries share ranks and may not be visible. Refer to the reports for full rankings.

Source: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security

Graphic: Soph Warnes, CNN

Restoring 'what was stolen' from religious courts

Israel's rabbinical courts are state-sanctioned religious courts that have legal authority over Jewish family law.

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They have long been criticized by Israeli women as an arena of disadvantage, patriarchy and inequality, especially in matters like alimony and child support. The Ruth and Emanuel Rackman Center at Bar Ilan University warned last month that the proposed expansion would lead to “serious violations of divorcing women’s rights, potentially the most serious that the Israeli justice system has seen in years.” If passed, the new law would also apply to Muslim Sharia courts.

Proponents of the bill note that the rabbinical courts used to handle financial affairs until Israel’s highest court stripped them of that authority in 2006. Now they intend to override that ruling.

“We will restore what was stolen and return the authorities to the rabbinical courts,” Simcha Rothman, the coalition chair of the Knesset judiciary committee, said in April. “We need not only to restore the judges but to restore the law to its place.”

The Yachin Research Center, a religious think tank in Israel, welcomed the bill as “an important step in restoring the place of Hebrew law.”

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Moriah, a mother of two girls in her late thirties, has been entangled for over four years in custody and property battles in the rabbinical courts. “In four years, not a single one of my requests has ever been approved – yet every absurd request from the other side was granted,” she said, describing an ordeal that has left her estranged from her two young daughters. Moriah, who opted not to use her last

name for her protection, said her visitation rights were revoked, while financial rulings pushed her into serious debt without opportunity to respond or appeal.

"It's an anti-woman institution," she told CNN, referring to rabbinical courts. "Three male judges sit in front of you, and then the husband and his lawyer, usually a man. You are usually the only woman in the room. It's a man's game, built on religious authority, and it's designed to break you."

The proposed legislation passed its first reading in November with a 63-43 vote. Two weeks later, another law was finalized giving rabbinical courts authority over child support without both parents' consent.

Women 'being dragged back decades'

Israel is not the only country to reverse women's rights in recent years. The US Supreme Court removed the protections of Roe v. Wade, and Hungary shut down gender studies programs while explicitly pursuing pro-natalist policies.

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In Israel, these steps are combined with what Hacker calls "the most extreme versions of Judaism – both ultra-Orthodox and nationalist – and it has profound consequences for women." Most alarming is the surge in violence and femicide. So far this year, 44 women have been murdered in Israel, the highest annual tally in a decade and well above the 35 who were murdered in 2024.



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men stand during a women's rights protest in the city of Bnei Brak, Israel on August 24, 2023. (*Oren Ziv/dpa/picture-alliance/SIPA*)

Women's advocates also link the recent surge in femicide to the surge in gun ownership – up 40% since the far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir eased licensing after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks. According to data from the Ministry of Welfare, the number of women applying to block partners' gun permits jumped from five in 2023 to 90 in 2024.

“This is the worst government for women in the history of the country,” said opposition lawmaker Merav Cohen, who chairs the Knesset committee on the status of women and gender equality. “At best, this government is indifferent to the harm done to women. At worst, it’s actively normalizing it.”

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"In any normal country, such a situation would prompt the government to declare an emergency, bring everyone together, draft an action plan, increase budgets – because all the warning lights are flashing red."

Cohen said the new rabbinical courts proposal is part of a broader trend within Israeli society of what she warns is a threat to women's rights, pushed by a religious minority with political power.

"The religious system is expanding as far as it can go," she said. "Israeli women are paying the price of Netanyahu's coalition and are being dragged back decades."



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