

News

Think Tank Under Fire Over Lack Of Women

By REBECCA SPENCE

June 16, 2006

A prestigious Israeli institute was scrambling this week to find female participants for a high-powered parley on the future of the Jewish people after being heavily criticized for failing to include any women.

In recent days the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, a Jerusalem-based policy consortium that boasts former American diplomat Dennis Ross as its board chairman, was deluged with letters from prominent American Jewish communal leaders who chided it for neglecting to include women. Just two days before the meeting was set to take place this week on Wednesday and Thursday at the Wye Plantation, the institute changed its tune, issuing last-minute invitations to a handful of women leaders.

"This is a stunning example of them being mired in the 1950s, and they're doing it with Jewish Agency money," said Deborah Lipstadt, chair of Jewish Studies at Emory University.

The institute, which is in part funded by a \$1 million grant from the Jewish Agency for Israel — the quasi-governmental body charged with facilitating immigration to Israel — first raised eyebrows last year when only two women attended a similar meeting of leading Jewish thinkers as part of its "Alternative Futures 2025" program. That program lays out future scenarios for global Jewry and analyzes ways of addressing problem situations that may arise. This year, when the institute added to its agenda a two-day brainstorming session for the leadership of major Jewish organizations, about 20 participants were initially invited; only two of them were women — and one couldn't attend.

The flap over the institute's meeting opens a window onto what some critics said is a larger problem in organized Jewish communal life: the low number of women occupying top posts at American Jewish organizations. While women in secular fields have made significant strides in breaking through the glass ceiling, women in Jewish organizational life still lag behind. For example, of the 19 Jewish federations in major American cities, none has a female top executive, a recent study found.

Controversy over the meeting this week first erupted June 9 when Shifra Bronznick, an organizational consultant and the founding president of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, sent an email to her contacts alerting them to the lack of female representation. The email urged recipients to write letters to Ross and the institute's director general, Avinoam Bar-Yosef, protesting the all-male roster. In

response, more than 55 people, including philanthropist Lynn Schusterman, sociologist Stephen M. Cohen and Rabbi David Ellenson, president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, wrote letters that ranged from harsh rebukes to heartfelt offers of assistance in identifying women invitees for future meetings.

"When I was preparing to go to a dinner in honor of the first woman president of Chile, it struck me as a savage irony that 50% of her cabinet were women, but in the Jewish community, it has to be brought to people's attention that it's appropriate to make sure that groups of decision-makers include women," said Bronznick.

Bronznick, the life partner of Forward editor-in-chief J.J. Goldberg, said that in the past year she and other women have made overtures to board members of the institute about the lack of female representation at special meetings and on its board. She further complained that the lack of "next generation leaders" was as much of a problem as the omission of women.

As a remedy for avoiding such contentious situations in the future, Bronznick said that the institute should "aggressively identify women and next generation leaders who meet the criteria of the categories as they've constructed them," as well as "broaden their thinking and change the categories in order to convene vibrant and inclusive groups."

Bar-Yosef defended the institute, saying it simply invited the leaders of organizations "who deal with the issues we're dealing with" and that the gaff was unintentional.

"I feel embarrassed about the story because I was not aware that the issue is so sensitive," Bar-Yosef said in an interview with the Forward. He added that women were included in other meetings, and pointed to the fact that two women, including Carole Solomon, chairperson of the Board of the Jewish Agency, were on the initial invite list.

In a stinging letter to Bar-Yosef, which was sent in advance of Bronznick's efforts, Lipstadt, of Emory University, pointed out that only one of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute's 13 board members and one of its 15 professionals are women.

"There's something terribly wrong here and in the past that, when women have tried to say something, they have been counseled not to make a fuss," said Lipstadt. "They say there aren't women CEOs, but what about Ruth Messinger?" she added, referring to the executive director of the American Jewish World Service, which has played a lead role in organizing Jewish communal efforts to stop the mass killing in the Darfur region of the Sudan.

Ross, a former Middle East negotiator under President Clinton who has served as chairman of the institute's board since its founding in 2002, said that he knew nothing of the list of invitees until the matter was brought to his attention last week. "The character of the meeting was defined by the positions people are in, where there are very few women, which is a problem in itself," Ross said.

A handful of Jewish organizations — including the country's largest Jewish charitable organization, the United Jewish Communities — have sought to redress the gender imbalance through their work with Bronznick's Advancing Women Professionals Initiative.

Launched in 2001 with grant money from New York philanthropists Barbara and Eric Dobkin and the UJC's now defunct Trust for Jewish Philanthropy, the initiative partnered with the UJC to look at gender equity within the federation system. Responding to the unbalanced results, the UJC, which represents 156 Jewish federations, announced in 2005 that half of the participants in its main leadership training program were women.

One of the participants in its leadership training program, Alisa Rubin Kurshan, who is senior vice president for strategic planning at the UJA-Federation of New York, was among the women who received final-hour invitations to attend the Wye meeting.

"If this controversy about the lack of appropriate women invitees to this week's Wye conference leads to greater consciousness about this issue in the future, it will have served a purpose," Kurshan said. Kurshan added that while she appreciated the invitation to the meeting, she was unable to attend.

Messinger was also issued an invitation on Monday, according to Bar-Yosef. But Messinger said she knew nothing of it.

"I don't think the issue is whether they reached out to me. The issue is that they have to set criteria for who they want to have come to discuss the future of the Jewish community," Messinger said. "They're perfectly free to say they want people near the top of the organizational structure, but they also have to be sensitive enough not to draw a loop that excludes key demographic pieces of the 21st century."

Morlie Levin, the executive director of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, which represents more than 300,000 volunteers, was also invited at the last moment, but could not attend.