

November 29, 2017

To:

Chairperson of the Ministerial Committee for Legislative Affairs, Minister Ayelet Shaked
Members of the Ministerial Committee for Legislative Affairs

Greetings,

Re.: Proposed Law: Council for Higher Education (Amendment – Encouraging Access to
Higher Education), 5777-2017

The above-mentioned proposed law was included on the agenda for the meeting of the Ministerial Committee for Legislative Affairs last Sunday (November 26, 2017), and the discussion was postponed by one week to December 3, 2017. The undersigned organizations express their strong reservations regarding the law. We urge the members of the Committee for Legislative Affairs not to consent to the widening of the gaps between the different sectors in Israeli society and to the deepening of discrimination against women, and to oppose the law.

The universities and colleges in Israel are attended today by religious and secular Jews, Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, traditional Jews and Arabs, Druze, Israelis of Ethiopian origin, and immigrants from the Former Soviet Union. This is the most important civil arena in Israeli society, where everyone meets just before they go on to become part of the Israeli job market and economy. The proposed law permitting gender segregation in academic institutions will seriously damage this arena.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the project to integrate Haredi men and women in the job market. The Israeli economy is in need of hands and brains, industrialists, and entrepreneurs. However, according to any parameter that has been examined to date, gender and sectarian segregation is not the way to encourage the integration of Haredim in education or employment.

In a period when Israeli society is undergoing changes and crises of identity, we must not destroy national institutions that bring together all the tribes and shades of society. Gender segregation inevitably also means sectarian segregation.

Academia has always been an institution that aspires to equality, pluralism, and freedom of thought. As such, it also plays an important role in creating cooperation in Israel in the social, conceptual, and economic spheres. Violating gender equality and equality between the different sectors is inconsistent with the academic ethos and with the true purpose of academia: to train researchers and citizens who work in the full range of fields of knowledge and interest.

The difficulties faced by many Haredim in integrating in Israeli society and in the job market are due to gaps in education, income, and cultural attitudes. Gender segregation in academia

will only exacerbate these gaps instead of narrowing them. Studies show that even now, the dropout rate from academic studies among Haredi men is particularly high: **58% of Haredi men who attempt to study for an academic degree drop out – including those who first studied in pre-academic courses and those who were admitted directly to degree courses.** The significant gaps prevent them from completing their degree studies. The solution is not segregation, but true access: pre-academic courses at a high standard providing a holistic response to all the needs of the sector, so that they can integrate properly in academia and in the job market. This approach has been implemented at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where the dropout rate is significantly lower.

The five-year plan for the integration of Haredim in higher education costs taxpayers billions of shekels. These funds are invested in encouraging a process of segregation and alienation, rather than in one designed to create partnership and bring benefits for the Israeli economy and Israeli society.

Extensive harm to women due to gender segregation:

- Women teaching assistants and lecturers are excluded from the men's classes. An academic institution where some students are permitted by law not to hear women is by definition an institution that discriminates against women.
- Haredi women students are forced to meet standards of modesty that are imposed by the institutions of higher education themselves. Thus the universities and colleges become part of a system imposing a specific level of modesty on women.
- If the proposed law is passed, we will also begin to see segregated academic conferences. The path for women researchers, which is already difficult, will be blocked: they will be unable to present their studies to all students, to attend all conferences, and so forth.
- We are already aware that some colleges offer segregated study programs in "women-free zones." The essence of such a zone is problem constitutionally, and in practice, of course, they violate the rights of all women studying in the institution.
- Gender segregation in academia today will inevitably lead to gender segregation in the job market tomorrow. Haredi men who did not see a single woman during their studies will regard segregated employment as a legitimate demand. The entire job market will become segregated and discriminatory.

In 2012, the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for Higher Education approved a plan to enhance access to higher education for the Haredi sector. The draft copy of the Council's principles permitting the establishment of segregated frameworks specifically stated that gender segregation is contrary to the basic principles of equality and dignity on which our legal system is based, and that this is particularly serious when it takes place in academic institutions that should promote values of tolerance and pluralism. Turning the exception into a legally-sanctioned norm endangers the principle that **the public domain in a liberal state**

must reflect the general and shared values of liberty and equality, and must be accessible to all.

Granting legislative approval to the grave and dangerous phenomenon of the exclusion of women and gender segregation, as now proposed, raises concern that the next stage will be to approve discriminatory and exclusive norms in other domains, such as the job market or the public domain in general. If the proposal is adopted, there is real cause to fear that its outcome will be serious damage to the fabric of life and to equality between the sexes in Israel, reversing the achievements that have been made in this field over the past decades.

Accordingly, we express our strong reservations concerning the above-mentioned proposed law and ask you to oppose the proposal and prevent its passage.

Sincerely,

Israel Women's Network

Rackman Center for the Advancement of Women's Status, Bar Ilan University

WIZO

Israel Religious Action Center

Kolech – Religious Women's Forum

Itach-Maaki Women Lawyers for Social Justice

Association for Civil Rights in Israel

Israel Hofsheet