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# Arab Women in Israel: Obstacles to Emancipation

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2010 - N° 21 Juillet 2010 - English -

Date de mise en ligne : Thursday 15 July 2010

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**This article is based on a paper that is to appear in Erella Shadmi (editor), *Hazon Isha: Nashim Borot Olamot Hadashim (The Vision of Woman: Women Create New Worlds)*, in Hebrew, 2008.**

Just a few yards separate Jisr al-Zarqa from Caesarea. The former is among the poorest villages in Israel. The latter houses the elite. Just a few yards—plus a wall built six years ago so that the Caesarea rich would not have to see their neighbors. A similar wall, but invisible, crosses the hyphen of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. You will find the same invisible wall between Jewish Me-Ami and Arab Um al-Fahm, between Nazareth Ilit and Nazareth, between Carmiel and its surrounding villages—in short, wherever Jews and Arabs live near each other. A hair's breadth separates worlds.

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Courtyard in Jisr al-Zarka. Photo by Goni Riskin

Jisr al-Zarqa differs from other Arab villages in one major respect: its women are the main breadwinners. According to sources in the local council, about 75% of the men do not work. The consequence is that 30% of the women do, compared to only 18.6% of all Arab women in Israel<sup>1</sup>. Jisr al-Zarqa's women are the village's basic source of livelihood. But has their work brought them sustenance and satisfaction? Not in the least. It is bitter drudgery, underpaid. Cleaning-company contractors from the coastal region find in these women a convenient source of unskilled labor, weak, desperate and cheap. They clean Tel Aviv. You will find them at the universities, the hospitals, the old-age homes and the banquet halls. Most wind up with less than the legal minimum wage of 3700 shekels (\$1028) for a month of eight-hour days. Even this minimum, when they get it, fails to cover the cost of living.

Each morning at 5:30, about 900 women from this village of 12,000, married and single, mothers and not, climb into vans. Most return at 5:00 p.m., some as late as 10:00. When the day's cleaning is done they come home to clean again and take care of the children, who've been out on the street half the day.

In Jisr al-Zarqa girls marry at 17, sometimes earlier. They live under a patriarchal regime, even when they are the breadwinners. They raise large families, often crowding into a single room in the multi-story house of the wider family. The average is seven per room. The social and economic gap between them and their Jewish neighbors widens from year to year.

### ***Poverty is Arab and female***

Jisr al-Zarqa represents, in extreme form, the general condition of Arabs in Israel. Although they make up only 15% of the population (not counting East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights), they are more than half the country's poor. Most of their families live below the poverty line, including about 60% of their children.

One reason for Arab poverty is that half the Arab families have only one breadwinner. As said, 18.6% of Arab women over age 15 are in the labor force, compared to 56% of Jewish women (Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, Tables 1.2 and 8.1, figures for 2006).

The average wage of Arab women is 47% lower than that of Jewish women. More than half earn the minimum wage or less, compared with a third of Jewish women (Source: "Condition of Employment...", cited above.)

A less direct cause of poverty among Arab women is their low educational level. About half never finished high school, compared to 10% of Jewish women. The employment rate varies according to education. Arab women who never finished elementary school have an employment rate of 3.6%, compared to 64.8% among those who studied beyond high school (*Ibid*). There are other reasons too for their poverty. Arab women are concentrated in low-salary fields. They are hired after Jews and paid less for the same work.

This situation leads many Arab women to give up the job search. About 12% drop out of the quest, compared to 1% among their Jewish counterparts (*Ibid*).

In February the National Insurance Institute published a report confirming that despite the overall economic growth, poverty in Israel continues to deepen. Growth bypasses the weak populations, Arabs especially. Poverty passes from generation to generation, as does the lack of faith in Israeli society. These feelings found expression in the Intifada of October 2000, which was most intense in Israel's poorest Arab communities. It greatly increased the mistrust between Arabs and Jews, with each side shutting itself off from the other.

### ***Why don't they work?***

Some blame Arab culture for the low rate of workforce participation among Arab women. In the last few years, indeed, we have witnessed a surge of religion in the villages, with the Islamic movement encouraging women to stay home and devote themselves to bearing and raising children.

Yet the rise of conservatism on the Arab street is less the cause than the result of low workforce participation. The cause is the discrimination and exclusion practiced against Arabs in all walks of life. Since the mid-1990's, moreover, the problem has been aggravated by neoliberal economics and globalization. The new Israeli economy, focused on the stock exchange and high-tech, has disposed of the "old economy"—and, with this, of jobs for Arab women. Their traditional sectors, namely textiles, agriculture and nursing-care, have vanished beneath their feet.

Globalization spurred the transfer of textile plants to cheap-labor countries: Egypt, Jordan, Romania and China. Nursing-care became the province of Filipinos.

And agriculture? This field once provided jobs for Arab women without professional skills. Before the creation of Israel in 1948, 90% of the Arab population lived from farming. Now the figure is 4%. Of the 50,000 farm employees in Israel today, about half are migrants, mostly from Thailand. Deep in debt on arrival and lacking organization, the Thais work for less than the legal minimum (a result of shady record-keeping), do not receive social benefits, and live on the job site. They amount to a hidden subsidy. In Europe and America too agriculture is subsidized, but there the subsidy is directly financial and goes to the agricultural branch in general, where it can benefit both farmers and workers. In Israel the subsidy takes the form of human beings and goes to the farmers alone.

As for those Arab women who do work in agriculture, what is the nature of their employment? In the Arab village there are many local subcontractors, who transport the women to work and collect their wages, from which they skim about 40%. There is rarely a salary slip, not to mention benefits. The workers wind up with 80 to 100 shekels for an eight-hour day—that's about \$20 to \$25—instead of the legal minimum of 160 shekels.

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WAC workers picking strawberries at a moshav in the Sharon Plain. Photo by Alon Ron.

Only deep poverty and lack of alternatives will bring a married, unskilled Arab woman to seek a job under such

conditions. The workers are usually unmarried women trying to increase their dowries. Often their earnings are absorbed into the wider family's budget. A family may send a few of its daughters to work for a pittance so that they won't sit at home. It may use their wages to pay debts or finance the older brother's studies—or build an extra story to house his future family. Given these circumstances, it is no wonder that work is considered a burden that the women are glad to be rid of as soon as they can.

Today the structure of the Arab female workforce has the shape of an upside-down pyramid: of the minority with jobs, about 70% are independent professionals in education, health or social work, while most of the remaining 30% are non-professionals in industry, agriculture, cleaning and other services.

The under-educated Arab women are thrice victims: they are Arabs in a Jewish state, women in a patriarchal Arab society, and unskilled workers in a neoliberal economy.

### ***The patriarchal family***

The patriarchal family is alive and well in the Arab village. Marriage to near-relatives is still frequent, and among the Bedouin in the Negev polygamy is common. The Arab birth rate is higher than among Jews. The average Arab family has 4.9 members, the Jewish 3.1. To divorce, for an Arab woman, means to return to her parents, and there is a good chance that she will lose her children. A divorcée is under a heavy stigma. It is not considered acceptable for her to live alone, and usually, in any case, she cannot afford the rent. There is still the practice of murder for the sake of "family honor." These conditions hardly conduce to political or social action on the woman's part.

The strongly patriarchal Arab family has always been a convenient tool of Israeli governments, who use it to dominate the Arab population and keep it in a condition of underdevelopment. An important factor in preserving the patriarchal system has been the geographical separation between Jews and Arabs, a kind of muted apartheid. Some 92% of the Arabs in Israel live in separate villages. This isolation shuts out the forces of urbanization. It prevents modernization, which normally weakens the hold of the extended family. What is more, there are no civil marriages in Israel. Weddings are subject to the religious courts. This fact also perpetuates separation.

But that is not all. The State of Israel has been supplying ever fewer services to the Arab villages. As a result, the Arab citizen is forced to depend on the extended family. The land squeeze (a result of Israeli policies) is such that young couples cannot usually rent apartments in the village. If they think of moving to a Jewish city, they will have to cope with discriminatory policies and higher living costs. Young couples have little choice, therefore, but to live on an upper floor of the wider family's house, where they must accept the rule of the patriarch.

Higher education could increase social mobility, but the vast majority of Arabs are stymied before they can reach that stage. Within the state-run educational system, their schools are on the lowest rung, while private schools are too expensive for most.

It is true, then, that the patriarchal Arab family implants conservative norms on the Arab woman, and these norms keep her from working. But that is the case only when jobs are unorganized and ill-paid. If every farm or industrial worker were to get the minimum monthly wage of 3700 NIS, plus the legally required social benefits, the attitude toward working women would likely change.

That attitude is very different in the mixed cities—Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Haifa, Ramle, Lod and Akko—where 4% of Arab women live. Despite the separation of populations within each of these, there are varied job opportunities close to home. Nearly half the Arab women who live in these cities have jobs.

If Arabs were free to live anywhere—in every city, moshav or kibbutz—in other words, if integration were real, then urbanization and modernization would overcome the tendencies to withdrawal and isolation.

### ***Role of the Workers' Advice Center***

In conservative societies it is the role of women to pass the values from one generation to the next, while embodying these values in their behavior. But when a society undergoes a shake-up, women can become a dynamic force for change.

It is impossible to seal the Arab family hermetically against the world around it. For instance, during the 1970's and 80's, as more women joined the labor force, their average age at marriage increased and the birth rate dropped. Like everyone else, Arab women are exposed to the consumer culture and to Western values. They are painfully aware of the gap between their financial circumstances and those of their Jewish neighbors. They suffer from this contradiction, but it cannot be resolved when they remain stuck in underdeveloped villages without any chance of satisfying work. As long as the possibilities for advancement fade, the women tend to reject the values of equality and social progress. If the grapes are out of reach, they must be sour.

Occasionally the government of Israel admits to the discrimination and declares it will change its ways. We find this, for instance, in the Comptroller's Report for 2001, as well as in the Orr Committee Report. Both came in response to the October Intifada. Their recommendations remained on paper only. The Finance Ministry likewise acknowledges day and night that the lack of employment among Arab women is the major reason for Arab poverty. All know that the importation of migrants perpetuates this situation. In February 2008, the Finance Ministry and the Bank of Israel published a program to reduce the number of migrant workers by 100,000. Yet programs are one thing, reality another.

There is, in short, a pattern. All the major forces in the lives of Arab women conspire to oppress them: the patriarchal family, village society, the labor market, the neoliberal government and globalization. To break this pattern, the women must organize, and this is where the Workers Advice Center (WAC) comes in, with its Women's Forum. We do not accept poverty and joblessness as decrees from on high. Poverty compels Arab women to work, and they need protection of their rights. Indeed, they need to be made aware of these rights. Exploitation, low wages and the stigma of menial labor keep most Arab housewives from attempting to find work. We target precisely the invisible women, the hundreds of thousands who lack training, in order to bring them into the work process. This is an essential, if insufficient, step toward self-empowerment. Agriculture is a natural choice: it can receive women by the thousands.

Through WAC, housewives find work at the real minimum wage and their rights are protected. They take part in classes for women's empowerment. We seek to prepare them as union activists, so that they can use their experience to bring more women into the organization. In this way the pattern can be broken, from village to village. The break means a revolution in their financial situation and their social status, in their self-concept and worldview. This revolution can bring about another, namely in the male society's attitude toward women. It may even shake up the indifference of Israeli Jews. It may help create solidarity among all victims of neoliberalism, women and men, Arabs and Jews. It may foster, at last, a healthy dialogue between the Arab and Jewish communities.

When we went out to test this thesis, the women at least did not disappoint us. Housewives, mothers of four or more, women in their 30's and 40's who hadn't worked since marriage, decided to undergo a drastic change in their lives. It wasn't easy to convince them that they could both work and manage their households. Because of past experience, they found it hard to believe that through WAC they would really earn the legal minimum and get full backing in relation to the employer. But their need to make ends meet proved decisive. The first women from Kufr Qara went to work two years ago, in March 2006.

They rise before dawn, prepare what the children will need for school, go to the job, cope with the farmers' demands, return home in the afternoon, clean house, help the children with homework, prepare the next day's meals, and do laundry. All this is no piece of cake, but those who master the art become standard bearers for the value of organized labor. Their financial situation improves. They can register the children for after-school activities. They can pay for a dentist or buy a computer. They can also get out of the house, meet new women, speak in Hebrew with the boss. In short, they begin to exert power over the forces that formerly ruled their lives. They feel their own worth, and they can also feel a change in the way people look at them. They also enjoy gathering one night each week, after work, in the empowerment course, to look at their lives from different angles and with new understanding.

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February 2008. Khittam Na'amneh of WAC instructs trade-union activists at the Kufr Qara Center. Photo by *Challenge*.

These empowerment groups, organized by our Women's Forum, are distinctive because the participants are all workers, sometimes on the same farm. This commonality has created a dynamic of closeness and trust. The Forum is also the setting in which to confront conservative attitudes, about child-rearing for example, and overcome prejudice.

WAC's workers get exposed to different worlds in different ways. They receive international delegations of farm-workers' unions, talk with them and hear what is happening in other lands. On International Women's Day and the First of May they bring their demands to the heart of Tel Aviv, where they meet Israelis who stand in solidarity with them, as well as Jewish women who've been harmed by government policy. Jewish and Arab artists contribute paintings to our annual art sale, whose proceeds are dedicated to the Arab female farm-workers of WAC. Poets visit their villages, reading in Hebrew and Arabic. The women are exposed to forms of art that are new to them. Through all these contacts, their struggle becomes multifaceted and concrete. The artists and poets, for their part, are exposed to an aspect of the Arab sector that they don't often see.

For every female Arab worker who is hired, ten are turned away, because the farmers prefer the Thais or the unorganized women ferried in by the subcontractors. Nevertheless, in a matter of months, the number of female farm workers joining WAC's Kufr Qara branch rose to 100. That figure would be still higher if we could get more job openings, for word has spread, and many new women have been knocking on our doors. In other villages too, in the Sharon Plain and Galilee, housewives are finding jobs through WAC and changing their lives.

A real change requires that the upside-down pyramid be set right: thousands of Arab women, even tens of thousands, must go out to work, organized in labor unions with other workers, in order to rescue their families and communities from the cycle of poverty and passivity. WAC's working women will have to learn to believe in themselves, taking action for political and social change. This liberation within Arab society can open the way to a wider solidarity in which Jews and Arabs, males and females, make common cause against their exploiters. Such a thing is no longer inconceivable. From the moment that the State of Israel adopted neoliberal economics, it ceased to worry about its poorer Jewish citizens, and one result has been the breakdown of Zionist unity.

The workers in this process will need a political party to represent them. The establishment of a broad movement, including Jews and Arabs, male and female, can shake up prejudices and bring down the wall of hatred between the two peoples on the basis of a common interest.

But change depends too on developments in the international arena, especially the weakening of America's hold over global economics and politics. It depends on the renewal of opposition to both extortionate capitalism and fundamentalism.

None of this will happen overnight, but the women now gathering in WAC signify a step in the right direction.

*Challenge*, March/April 2008