



## Arab Women in the Labor Market

By Ola Shtewee for the Women's Budget Forum  
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It is not uncommon to hear declarations by senior policymakers that the advancement of women in general, and Arab women in particular, is key to the advancement of society as a whole. Yet a huge gap persists between these declarations and their implementation, such that the economic, social and political status of Arab women is today among the lowest – if not the very lowest – in Israeli society.

This position paper reports on the status of Arab women in the labor market, barriers that impede their integration into jobs, and proposals for removing these barriers.

### Arab women: General

In 2005, Arab women constituted only 5.6% of all women in the civilian labor force of Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005)<sup>1</sup>. The proportion of Arab women who are in the civilian labor force has remained virtually unchanged over the past decade: 16% in 1995 and 18% in 2005 (CBS, 2005). In contrast, almost 56% of Jewish women were in the civilian labor force in 2005 (CBS, 2005).

Many attribute the deplorably low number of Arab women in the labor force to cultural factors. Below we present non-cultural barriers that prevent Arab women from integrating into the labor force.

### Places of work and entrepreneurship

89.1% of Arab women who work are wage-earners (Galilee Society and Mada, 2004). 44.7% of Arab women who work hold part-time jobs, compared with 41% of women in general (CBS, 2005). 45% of Arab women who hold part-time jobs report that they work part time because there are no full-time or second jobs available. 22.4% state that they work only part time because they also take care of their homes and children (Galilee Society and Mada, 2004).

<sup>1</sup> The civilian labor force includes all persons aged 15 and over who are either employed or seeking employment.

The limited job offerings for the Arab population, and Arab women in particular, is a major obstacle preventing Arab women from integrating into the labor market. The limited supply stems in part from the lack of development and investment in the Arab population: only 3.2% of all municipal industrial zones under the supervision of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor are located in Arab towns (Dichter and Ghanem, 2003: 27). Government decisions and plans for developing industrial zones in Arab areas have not been implemented, or implemented only partially (Fares, 2004: 106). Place of residence plays a significant role in participation in the labor force. Thus, for example, approximately 50% of Arab women who live in mixed or large cities (with the exception of Jerusalem) participate in the work force; this drops to 24% in medium-sized or small cities (where most Arab women live), and to 13% in small townships; in the south, only 12.8% of Arab women participate in the work force (Fichtelberg, 2004). In mixed cities, where jobs are in greater supply and more accessible than in Arab towns, the participation of Arab women in the work force resembles more closely that of their Jewish counterparts.

To add to this, the state, which is the largest employer of women in Israel, does not employ a sufficient number of Arab women: Only 3.1% of all women in the civil service are Arab (Haider, 2005), though 18% of working age women are Arab.

Arab women comprise 1.8% of all civil service employees. The lack of public-government services in Arab towns, and failure to enforce the Civil Service Law (Appointments) 1959 (mandating the diverse representation of workers in the civil service – Amendment 11, 2000), which calls for the giving of preference to Arab employees, are the main factors contributing to the low percentage of Arabs in general, and women in particular, in the civil service.

Often, opening a small business can partially resolve the problem of the lack of jobs for Arab women in Arab towns. Small businesses are globally recognized as one of the most effective means of encouraging employment and providing solutions to problems such as dividing one's time between home and job, and an inadequate supply of jobs suitable to the available workers' skills. Entrepreneurship is still in development in Israel, promoted particularly by grassroots social organizations that help in the founding and survival of small businesses. The state provides guarantees for a loan fund for small and medium-sized businesses. These funds, intended to encourage the establishment of small businesses, are not easily accessible to women, especially not Arab women (Shtewee, 2007), who cannot meet the conditions for the loan and are perceived by the bank as "problematic" clients. The Association for Economic Empowerment – a non-profit that helps small businesses access these loans in the framework of a joint project with the Koret Foundation – reports cases in which banks refused to lend money to Arab women even when a full loan guarantee was given by the Koret Foundation.

## **Education**

Data indicate a clear relationship between education and the integration of women, particularly Arab women, in the work force. The more years of schooling, the more likely Arab women are to be in the labor market.

**Participation of Arab and Jewish women in the labor market, by years of schooling (percentage)**

| Years of schooling | 2001       |              | 2005       |              |
|--------------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
|                    | Arab women | Jewish women | Arab women | Jewish women |
| 0-4                | 2.5%       | 8.9%         | 3%         | 9.4%         |
| 5-8                | 8.5%       | 31.8%        | 10%        | 18.9%        |
| 9-12               | 15.9%      | 48.5%        | 13%        | 49.2%        |
| 13-15              | 40.6%      | 64.9%        | 37%        | 66.2%        |
| 16+                | 74.6%      | 78.4%        | 67%        | 78.7%        |

**Source:** Central Bureau of Statistics, *Manpower Survey*, 2001, 2005.

The above data reveal that the proportion of Jewish women with 9-12 years of schooling in the labor market is three times higher than the proportion of Arab women with the same years of schooling. This gap narrows with more schooling. Over time, however, participation in the labor market of Arab women with 13 or more years of schooling significantly declined. Although this group has the highest proportion of participation in the work force, the decrease over time might indicate the absence of suitable job opportunities for these women. It should be emphasized that only 17.3% of Arab women have 13 or more years of schooling (Fichtelberg, 2004).

Central Bureau of Statistics data from 2003-04 reveal the proportion of Arab students at the universities, but the data lack a gender breakdown of Arab students:

**Students in universities by degree, gender and population group, 2003-04**

|                | Bachelor's Degree | Master's Degree | Ph.D. Degree |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Total          | 78,561            | 35,629          | 8,714        |
| Thereof: women | 55.9%             | 57.3%           | 52.8%        |
| Arab           | 9.8%              | 5.1%            | 3.3%         |

**Source:** Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Abstract No. 56, Table 8.46.

Abu-Asba notes a sharp increase since 1980 in the relative proportion of women among Arab students: Some 51% of Arab undergraduates at Israeli universities and colleges were women (Abu-Asba, 2005: 216). Adva Center data reveal that in 2003-04, 55.3% of all Arab students at universities were women (Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007). Nevertheless, Arabs in general still constitute only 9.8% of the total undergraduate student population, compared to 18% – their proportion in the population at large.

The low number of Arab students in higher education might be explained by the low level of grade school education and low proportion of success at matriculation exams, but also by difficulties encountered when applying to institutes of higher learning and during the course of study there.

### **Schools**

Data from 2005 indicate that the number and proportion of Arab children in schools have increased since the 1970s, and the level of education of the Arab population has risen. The proportion of Arab girls increased among schoolchildren. Nevertheless, despite the improved level of education in the Arab population and the diminished gap with the Jewish sector, there are still deep disparities between the two populations.

One of the main problems of the Arab school system becomes apparent in the dropout rates of students:

**Proportion of student dropouts (secondary schools), 2001-2005**

| Year             | Arabs | Jews |
|------------------|-------|------|
| <b>2001-2002</b> | 12%   | 6%   |
| <b>2002-2003</b> | 11%   | 5.6% |
| <b>2004-2005</b> | 7%    | 3.6% |

**Source:** Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2005.

The data reveal that the percentage of dropouts among Arab high-school students is decreasing, but still twice as large as the percentage of dropouts among Jews. Gender-aggregated data could not be found.

Another problem regards the percentage of Arab students who pass their matriculation exam, which is a requirement for acceptance to an institution of higher learning. 87% of those who pass are Jewish, while only 13% are Arab. Another illuminating figure indicates that **4.7% fewer Arabs passed the matriculation in 2004, while only 2.9% fewer Jewish students failed to pass during that period.**

### **Number and proportion of students who passed the matriculation exam, out of all Arab and Jewish high school seniors, 2003-2005**

| Year | Jewish Students              |  | Arab Students                |  |
|------|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|--|
|      | Number passing matriculation | Proportion passing of all 12 <sup>th</sup> graders | Number passing matriculation | Proportion passing of all 12 <sup>th</sup> graders |
| 2003 | 45,966                       | 61.3%  | 6,823                        | 47.3%  |
| 2004 | 47,005                       | 60.6%  | 7,247                        | 45.5%  |
| 2005 | 44,050                       | 57.7%  | 6,734                        | 40.8%  |

**Source:** Data adapted from the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports, Pedagogical Administration, Matriculation Exam Data, various years.

There are many reasons for this situation. We shall focus here on government resources – the budget – as follows:

Physical infrastructure: A significant disparity exists in the physical infrastructure of the Arab and Jewish school systems. Numerous government decisions and promises to build classrooms were not carried out or were carried out only partially (Sikkuy Report, 2004-2005: 37-38; Fares, 2004: 115-120).

Pedagogical plans and technological education: In Government Decision 2467 from October 2000, NIS 280 million were allocated for pedagogical programs to advance education in the Arab sector, and NIS 66 million for developing courses of study in secondary schools and technological fields in schools of higher education – a total of NIS 346 million. Only 59% of the amount allocated in this government decision was ever actually spent (Sikkuy Report, 2004-2005: 37-38).

### ***Barriers to acceptance and study in post-secondary frameworks***

The criteria for acceptance to college in Israel discriminate against Arab students, among others. Acceptance is more difficult for Arab students in light of the huge gap in their schooling, as noted above, which lowers results on both the matriculation and the psychometric exams – two important components in the criteria for acceptance to institutes of higher learning. Indeed, the fact that the psychometric exam is biased for western/English-speaking culture and translated from Hebrew to Arabic compound their difficulty for Arab students, lowering their success rate in the exam (Dagan-Bozaglo, 2007). These facts become clearer in light of the acceptance rates at the universities: in 2004, 23.6% of all those who applied to Israeli universities were rejected: 18.8% of Jews who applied were rejected, and 46.5% of Arabs who applied were rejected (Abu-Saad, 2006). In addition, some institutions of higher learning add restrictions that might deter or prevent Arab students, women in particular, from their right to higher education, such as a minimum age of 21 in some institutions for studying nursing and occupational therapy. This requirement might well deter Arab women interested in these fields, as they would have to delay the beginning (and conclusion) of their studies, leading some to give up on studying these fields.

### **Daycare facilities**

Data reveal the connection between the family status of women and their participation in the labor force; the proportion of married women is lower than of single women (Fichtelberg, 2004). There is also a relationship between the number of children and the participation of Arab women in the labor force: the more children, the fewer women who work. The participation of mothers with infants and babies is lower than the participation of mothers with older children.

The shortage of daycare programs for children under age three is a serious barrier to the participation of Arab women in the labor market. In June 2007, some 2,300 family day care facilities operated in Israel, which cared for 12,000 children, of which 850 (some

36%) were located in Arab towns and cared for 4,223 children (some 35% of the total) (Weissblau, 2007). In addition, 1,600 daycare centers operate for some 74,000 children, of which only 1,095 are Arab (about 1.5%) (ibid.). All told, this means that Arab children account for only 6% of all those in approved daycare frameworks for preschool children, although they constitute 27% of the population of children under three years of age. In the absence of daycare frameworks, as noted, leaving the home for work becomes impossible and in many cases financially not viable.

## **Mobility**

The importance of transportation for integrating into the labor market is self-evident; in the absence of efficient and accessible means of transport, working outside the home is very difficult. 53.5% of Arab women who are employed work at home or in the town where they live. 88.5% of the working women have jobs up to 29 kilometers from their homes (Galilee Society and Mada, 2004). This fact can be explained by a number of factors, of which transportation and mobility are a part.

Public transportation is lacking in Arab towns, both within the towns themselves and between towns and centers of employment. A survey carried out by Kayan Feminist Organization (hereinafter “the survey”), reveals that this situation has created two groups: the strong group having a vehicle and driver’s license, and the other group, dependent on the first for mobility needs. Arab women have less access to vehicles than do Arab men, and therefore the absence or limited public transportation harms women predominantly, and leads to a double exclusion: from society and the labor market. The limited access of women to vehicles derives from several factors: the economic situation of Arab women; the low participation of Arab women in the labor force, and the low salaries they receive – only 73% of the salary of Arab men. All these are obstacles in acquiring a car and/or driver’s license. The survey also reveals that 44% of the women who do not have a driver’s license (63% of the survey sample) declared that the reason for not having a license was financial, 23% reported social constraints, and 30% said they have no need of a car (Keinan, 2004). The data also revealed that only 5% of the travel of the surveyed women was done via public transportation, while 85% declared they would use public transportation within town if it existed (ibid.). This survey was carried out in several Arab locales, but accurately reflects the situation in most, if not all, Arab towns.

Another reason for the gap in access to a car is the status of the woman in the home and society: women in general, particularly Arab women, are still responsible for most of the work at home and with the family, and are excluded from decision making at home and in society. The movement of women to nontraditional roles requires social “permission.” The survey reveals that 70% of participating Arab women did not leave their town alone (ibid: 51).

## **Enforcement of labor laws**

The lack of enforcement of labor laws, especially those related to minimum wage, constitutes a negative incentive for going to work. Enforcement in Israel is very lax

regarding workers who are not organized into unions, and especially lax regarding Arab women. A 1998 survey in Nazareth of 190 places of work exposed gross violations of the rights of women at work: 61% of the women were paid less than the minimum wage. This is in addition to violating their rights to annual leave, sick days, and overtime payments (Faris & Hwari, 1998).

Aside from the above, no recent data exist about the enforcement of labor laws for Arab women, but complaints submitted to social advocacy organizations indicate widespread violations of labor laws with respect to Arab women.

### **Professional training**

“Professional training is one of the tools at the disposal of the state to improve the human capital of its residents” (Swirski, 2006). The Mahut Center, a nonprofit that helps Arab women find employment, views professional training as a critical tool for enhancing the participation of women in the labor force. Yet despite the importance of this tool, government policies have slashed the allocations for professional training. In recent years, the budget for professional training for adults was drastically cut – from NIS 230.4 million in 2000 to NIS 92.47 million in 2006. Even before the sweeping cutbacks, the proportion of Arab women in professional training courses was low, and characterized by participation in traditional courses and those defined as “pre-employment” (ibid.). Possible explanations for this: low education, quality of the training, areas of training, and limited access to the audience of Arab women.

As noted, professional training is a critical tool, but not effective when other factors – such as education and jobs – are absent. Professional training alone, regardless of how good, cannot be of service to women when suitable jobs are not available.

### **The cultural factor**

Many attribute the low proportion of Arab women in the labor force to cultural factors. Claims are made such as “Arab women don’t leave their village – it’s a cultural matter.” New research by Yonai and Kraus offers a theory that the structure of opportunities determines whether Arab women enter the labor market. In their view, Palestinian society in Israel has undergone “revolutionary change under Israeli rule” in most areas of life, and therefore the low proportion of working women cannot be attributed to cultural factors: “If despite this there is no leap forward in the employment of women, we cannot attribute it to the existence of a constricting traditional society; the society is dynamic and revolutionary changes did take place in it. To the extent that conservative values prevent more women from looking for employment – and, as noted, we believe this is not the main reason – rather than blame the tradition and culture, one must ask why, although many behavioral norms have changed, far-reaching change in this matter remains to be seen” (Yonai and Kraus – publication pending).

## **Summary**

Arab women suffer from double discrimination around issues of employment: as women in a patriarchal society and as members of the Arab minority within Israel. Although the problems and obstacles in the integration of Arab women into the work force are also in principle the problems of the Arab population in general, these are more severe for Arab women. The absence of suitable daycare frameworks, for example, becomes a problem of Arab women because they are the primary caregivers of the children.

Enhancing the participation of Arab women in the labor market is not dependent upon the removal of cultural obstacles, as many have said, but the removal of structural obstacles noted above. More Arab women in the labor market will raise their status and improve the quality of life within Arab society in Israel, and also improve the economic situation of Arab society in general, thereby contributing to greater prosperity for all. Thus, encouraging Arab women to participate in the labor force is not only in the interest of Arab society, but of Israeli society as a whole.

### **Women's Budget Forum demands:**

1. The creation of jobs in Arab towns and the development of industrial zones with ensured jobs for Arab women and incentives to employers to hire them; also, in consultation with organizations active in the field, the creation of professional training programs to address the needs of Arab women.
2. Increased resources to integrate Arab employees into the public sector, with preference given to Arab women. Implementation of government decisions (appropriate representation of workers in the civil service, Amendment 11, 2000), and adjustment of the criteria for entrance exams.
3. Encouragement of entrepreneurship among Arab women, using experience gained by social advocacy organizations active in this field.

4. Implementation of government decisions about resource allocation to close the gaps in the school system, including measures to reduce the number of dropouts and raise the number of those who pass the matriculation exam.
5. Increasing the access of Arab women to institutions of higher learning and creating programs to assist them in their studies.
6. Creation of a national program to increase the number of daycare programs, especially for children under the age of three.
7. Creation of a national program to bring public transportation into Arab towns, with gender considerations integral to the planning, and in consultation with organizations having experience in this area.
8. Enhancement of the mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement of all matters related to labor laws and their implementation.

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