

Israel: advocacy on employment issues for Arab women

Oxfam GB

Community

Besides discrimination as a result of their Arab identity and exclusion due to illiteracy, Arab women in Nazareth, Israel are subject to conservative gender perspectives within their own communities.

Context

In 2005, the Israeli national government and private sector contractors launched a job placement programme for 14,000 poverty-stricken unemployed households among Arab and Jewish minority communities. The aim of the programme, The Wisconsin Plan, was to help income support-dependent, long-term jobless individuals, to break out of the cycle of unemployment and poverty.

Private companies were tasked with cutting public welfare spending by facilitating job placements through Wisconsin Centres. If Wisconsin Centres did not cut public spending on welfare by 35% within six months, the companies would not profit from the Plan. The programme was subject to considerable political debate, even within the Israeli government.

Concerns of Oxfam GB partner, Sawt El-Amel (Laborers' Voice) were reflected in the words of 1,000 Arab women, interviewed as part of a Participatory Needs Assessment:

- Women were required to register at Wisconsin centres so that their husbands could access benefits even if they had no plan to work but to stay at home as housewives. The scheme forced women into work even if they **did not want to** and preferred to work at home looking after their families. The scheme required women to work outside the home in spite of the fact that many of them did not want to or could not due to issues such as lack of childcare. If they failed to participate in the scheme, the household was no longer entitled to social protection.
- Many mothers felt prevented from fulfilling responsibilities towards their children and there was a lack of day care, youth club or other support provision. One participant reported that her Wisconsin Plan case manager said: 'Let them [the children] roam the streets; it's none of our business.' Daily, hundreds of children were left without a guardian while their parents attended Wisconsin centres. Apart from accidents and one child going missing, mothers reported that their children's performance in school suffered because of the lack of home tutoring.

If participants were thought to have 'not-cooperated' or refused work, their benefits were cut for 1-2 months

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- The specific vulnerability of Arab minorities in Israel due to existing discrimination in education, employment and infrastructure provision were not considered. There are few jobs for Arab citizens in and around Nazareth and virtually no jobs for Arab women. The majority of Arab men are employed in construction, a sector that requires physical strength. In Galilee, the majority of working Arab women used to be employed in garment factories, jobs that have disappeared since the outsourcing of production to Egypt and Jordan
- Many women reported verbal or physical abuse from their case managers. During a cosmetics course held inside the Wisconsin centre, women participants were asked to depilate their legs in front of other people in the centre, including men. Women refusing to participate in such activities often faced sanctions
- Sawt El-Amel found that the majority of the 1,000 women (to January 2006) lost benefits for being 'uncooperative' or 'defiant'. Fifteen women were sanctioned for participating in a protest event organised by the Women's Platform, and a large number of Wisconsin Plan participants, both women and men, were threatened with sanctions if they cooperated with Laborers' Voice.
- Hundreds of women worked as day labourers without any rights and with very poor working conditions. Women worked for several days as farm hands without a bathroom until they passed on to the next menial job. In many cases, they were not paid for their work.
- It was cheaper for companies to recruit Wisconsin participants than other workers, and as a result previous employees were laid off, as participants substituted salaried employees.

Oxfam GB and partner roles

Sawt El-Amel is a local NGO working in the field of labour rights partly supported financially by Oxfam GB. In 2005 the organisation requested financial support from Oxfam to deepen its understanding of the impact of government programmes on women, through a participatory needs assessment. Although not originally planned as part of the project, marginalised Arab women began to meet together and decided that it was important for them to lobby the government about their situation and that of their families. Some of these women have subsequently formed a platform within Sawt El-Amel to ensure all of the organisation's work takes into account the experience of marginalised women.

Oxfam GB provided a small grant to Laborers' Voice, to conduct the participatory needs assessment with 1,000 women from Nazareth who were affected by the welfare-to-work Wisconsin Plan programme in 2005. Oxfam GB staff also supported Laborers' Voice to raise awareness of the effects of the Wisconsin Plan and to plan for future development of the work.

Physical appearance

Unprecedented levels of visible social activism were witnessed in 2005-2006 in communities around Nazareth as women and men stood shoulder to shoulder to fight against the injustices of the Wisconsin system.

Direct quotes

Sawt El-Amel:

'The needs assessment showed how seemingly 'vulnerable' members of society - indigent women belonging to a national minority - can develop strength in participatory actions.'

Maisa Hajj Yehya, 25, job-seeker:

'Where are the real jobs? They handle us like day labourers, without contracts, without payment. We are trafficked like slaves.'

Ms Yehya was sent to three different 'job openings' within one month. First, she worked as a farm hand for two days, and then she went to a garment factory where no extra workers were needed. Finally she was sent to a meat factory where she worked for two days before the employer told her

that he did not need her. Ms. Hajj Yehya did not sign any work contract nor did she receive any salary for the days she worked.

The process and the results

Wisconsin participants were interviewed and carried out group work with Laborers' Voice in order to identify the obstacles Arab women face under the Wisconsin system. They obstacles were listed as follows:

- Forced to work without child care support
- Chronically low level of education and professional skills
- Lack of work experience
- Bad command of the Hebrew language
- Limited mobility due to insufficient public transport network
- Absence of industrial zones in Arab communities
- Lack of day care centres
- No demand for female Arab workers
- Low public standing

Although the women also prioritised improvement of their social-economic situation and agreed on a need for an active role in this change, they said that a short-term job placement programme could not remedy these issues.

Sawt El-Amel together with Arab women produced posters, leaflets, used the media and ran events to help raise awareness of the effect of the Wisconsin Plan both within Israel and internationally.

A recent audit of the Wisconsin programme included recommendations and concerns raised by Sawt El-Amel and other organisations. This in turn has contributed to the government's plan to omit sick, elderly and single mothers from the Wisconsin Programme. In addition, contract criteria have been changed which would mean that individuals would need to hold a job for an entire year in order to be considered 'employed'.

One of the major victories was the discontinuation in January 2006 of the forced volunteer programme that required the participants (mainly women) to work full-time in exchange for income benefits. The volunteer programme provided no day-care facilities and after-school programmes in Nazareth, so that small children were left without guardians for most of the day. In the long-term, the Women's Platform contributes to the search for alternative, sustainable solutions for women and their families to achieve self-sufficiency.

Lessons

- For policies and programmes to meet the needs of the most marginalised women and men, special efforts are required to listen to their needs, priorities and potential contributions. It cannot be assumed that policies and programmes targeting women and men will benefit the most marginalised because they are usually subject to particular barriers and constraints.
- If stakeholders demonstrate a belief in the poorest to understand their own situation and identify solutions to the problems they face, the most marginalised of groups will usually rise to this challenge and can be supported to be agents of their own change. Service providers need to define standards for their services, which are rooted in the experience of consumers.

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