

## Main Barriers to Employment of Arab Women in Israel Challenges, Gaps, and Recommendations for Promoting Equality Policy

The participation rate of Arab women in the Israeli labor market has been steadily increasing in recent decades, yet it remains low compared to Jewish women and Arab men.<sup>1</sup> Many of them are employed in low-paying professions, such as welfare, education, health, caregiving, and house cleaning, often under exploitative employment conditions, including part-time jobs, job insecurity, and inadequate enforcement of their rights.<sup>2</sup>

It bears noting that Arab women are not a homogeneous group, and that some sub-groups are particularly vulnerable where the labor market is concerned. Women without academic education, manual laborers, and Bedouin women, especially those living in unrecognized villages, face particularly low employment rates and unique obstacles to integrating into the labor market.<sup>3</sup>

### Structural and Political Barriers

Countless studies indicate that Arab society suffers from structural and institutional discrimination in terms of the education system, geographic distance from employment centers, and a low level of employment-supporting infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> One of the main manifestations of this long-standing discrimination is deliberate exclusion or selective integration into the labor market, which has resulted in continued economic and social underdevelopment of Arab localities.<sup>5</sup> For example, the 2016 State Comptroller's Report indicates that the Arab population suffers from ongoing discrimination in practice and that the State of Israel has failed to implement substantive equality between Jewish and Arab

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\* English-language reference. All other references in this report are in Hebrew.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Nasreen Haddad Haj-Yahya, Dr. Muhammed Khalaily, Dr. Arik Rudnitzky, and Ben Fargeon, [\\*Statistical Report on Arab Society in Israel: 2021](#), Ministry for Social Equality and Israel Democracy Institute, 17 March 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Women's Team, [Position Paper #1: Impact of Corona Crisis on Employment of Arab and Ultra-Orthodox Women](#), Crisis Expert Teams, May 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Shelly Mizrahi-Simon and Orly Almador-Lotan, [Employment of Arab Women](#), Knesset Research and Information Center, 31 July 2016; Jerry Almo-Capital and Orly Almador-Lotan, [Data on Employment of Arab Women, Particularly Negev Bedouin](#), Knesset Research and Information Center, 27 February 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Eran Yashiv and Nitsa Kasir, [Economy of Israel's Arab Society](#), in: Lights and Shades in Market Economy: The Israeli Economy 1995-2017, Am Oved Publishing House and Maurice Falk Institute for Economic Research in Israel, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Amalia Sa'ar, [Palestinian-Israeli Women's Employment: Mystery of Their Absence and Way to Integration into Formal Labor Force](#), Haifa's University Sociology and Anthropology Department, 2011.

citizens.<sup>6</sup> The report notes that despite some change in Israeli government policy in recent years, the overall employment situation in Arab society remains grim and worrisome, as the measures taken in this area have been insufficient, improper, and ineffective, as allocated budgets remained unutilized and program goals unachieved.<sup>7</sup>

The structural and political barriers that have deepened the economic and social gaps between Arab and Jewish society manifest themselves in different ways in men and women, with Arab women facing particularly low employment rates as a result of intersecting and cumulative marginalization due to being women and belonging to a national minority.<sup>8</sup>

Despite attempts to link the low employment rate of Arab women to "cultural reasons" or the "inferior status" of women in Arab society, most studies and reports written in Israel point to a more complex reality and highlight numerous barriers that either prevent Arab women from entering the labor market or render it unfeasible.<sup>9</sup>

A study conducted by Dr. Yousef Jabarin in the early 2000s found that the participation rate of Arab women in the Israeli labor force was significantly lower than in Arab countries and developing nations. Based on a sample of 1,500 Arab women, the study found that the main reason for the low participation rate was a lack of available jobs. The vast majority of unemployed women (73%) prefer to work in their place of residence, close to home, due to their multiple roles within the family, while 43% would be willing to enter the labor market immediately if offered the opportunity.

Prof. Amalia Sa'ar's extensive research on the employment of Arab women also shows that, contrary to the "cultural gap discourse" that manipulatively uses cultural characteristics of Arab society as a supposed explanation for the economic and social disparities with Jewish society, the real problem lies in long-standing structural and political barriers and in the limited opportunities available to Arab women in Israel's labor market. Given the lack of suitable jobs, the absence of reliable and accessible employment-supporting infrastructure, and low-income levels, the cost of entering the formal labor force is too high for most families. The "opportunity cost," which provides a weighted calculation of

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<sup>6</sup> [State's Actions to Encourage Integration of Arab Population in Labor Force](#), *State Comptroller's Annual Report*, 24 May 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Haj-Yahya et al 2022, Footnote #1.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Yousef Jabarin, [Employment of Israel's Arabs: The Challenge of Israel's Economy](#), 18th Caesarea Economic Policy Planning Forum and Israel Democracy Institute, June 2010.

the maximum return from employment, including both financial and non-financial returns (such as a sense of fulfillment versus personal and social costs), leads to the conclusion that Arab women continue to stay out of the formal labor market because it simply does not pay for them in the current conditions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Lack of Adequate Public Transportation**

There is a broad consensus in academic and professional literature, both governmental and non-governmental studies and even State Comptroller reports, that the lack of adequate public transportation in Arab localities is a major barrier to the participation of Arab women in the labor market and to the realization of the economic potential of the Arab population as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

As early as 2008, the Bank of Israel pointed to mobility difficulties, the lack of public transportation, and the inaccessibility of Arab localities to employment centers as factors influencing labor market participation patterns.<sup>12</sup> This position has been echoed by the Knesset Research and Information Center,<sup>13</sup> the Israel Democracy Institute,<sup>14</sup> and a wide range of researchers and professionals who agree that in order to promote employment within Arab society, particularly among Arab women, a solution must be found for the unavailability of adequate public transportation in Arab towns. Moreover, studies focusing on the employment of Arab women with academic degrees have also identified this barrier as a significant obstacle to their integration into the labor market.<sup>15</sup>

The State Comptroller has urged the Transportation Ministry to address the problem:

**"Studies have shown that the absence or limited access to public transportation in Arab towns is among the factors contributing to the low employment rates among the Arab population, at times**

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<sup>10</sup> Amalia Sa'ar, [The Gender Contract Under Neoliberalism: Palestinian Israeli Women's Labor Force Participation](#), *Feminist Economics*, 20 June 2016.

<sup>11</sup> [Advancement of Public Transportation in Non-Jewish Localities](#), *State Comptroller's Special Report*, 13 March 2019.

<sup>12</sup> [Bank of Israel Annual Report-2008: The Labor Market](#), *Bank of Israel*, 19 April 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Shelly Mizrahi-Simon and Orly Almagor-Lotan, [Employment of Arab Women](#), *Knesset Research and Information Center*, 31 July 2016; Jerry Almo-Capital and Orly Almagor-Lotan, [Data on Employment of Arab Women, Particularly Negev Bedouin](#), *Knesset Research and Information Center*, 27 February 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Haj-Yahya et al 2022, Footnote #1.

<sup>15</sup> Yaser Awad, [Arab Academic Women in the Employment Market](#), *Women Against Violence*, 2007 (Arabic); Khaled Abu-Asba, [Arab Academic Women Unemployed in Israel: 2018 Situation Report and Proposed Model for Intervention](#), *Massar Institute and National Insurance Institute*, November 2018.

**leading even to a complete disconnection from the labor market.**

Arab localities have for years suffered from almost total lack of regular public transportation, which still remains inadequate by the end of this audit, both in terms of bus routes and subsidized fares."<sup>16</sup>

Attempts to improve the situation face several challenges, including the weakness of Arab local authorities, infrastructure problems, the unavailability of public land, and the under-designation of industrial and employment areas in Arab towns (which amount to only 2.4% of all industrial zones in Israel). The dearth of industrial and commercial zones, in combination with the lack of appropriate transportation, is a direct cause of the difficult economic situation and the unavailability of employment in most Arab municipalities.

### **Lack of Childcare Centers**

Another major barrier to the proper integration of Arab women into the labor market is the lack of daycare centers for children under the age of three. Academic and professional literature are of one mind about the need to remove this barrier and increase the availability of daycare facilities for children and infants as an employment-supporting tool for Arab women.<sup>17</sup>

The connection between the availability of accessible, high-quality, and reasonably priced daycare centers for children under the age of three and the economic integration of women into the labor market is an issue faced by many countries around the world, including developed nations. International organizations like the World Bank and the OECD try to promote policies that encourage parents, especially women, to enter the workforce by fostering state-funded and subsidized daycare centers and making childcare costs more accessible for working parents.<sup>18</sup>

There is no doubt that the gap between Jews and Arabs in this area cries to high heaven, and that the access to daycare centers in Arab society is far from meeting the needs of working parents or working women. A 2008 report by the Knesset Research and Information Center pointed to major disparities between Arab and Jewish societies, reaching up to four

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<sup>16</sup> [State's Actions to Encourage Integration of Arab Population in Labor Force](#), *State Comptroller's Annual Report*, 24 May 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Amalia Sa'ar 2011, Footnote #6; Knesset Research and Information Center, Footnote #3; Bank of Israel 2008; Footnote #10.

<sup>18</sup> Tea Trumbic, Diva Dhar, Alena Sakhonchik, and Jungwon Kim, [\\*Filling the Gaps: Childcare Laws for Women's Economic Participation](#), *World Bank Blogs*, 14 June 2022.

times (only 4% of Arab children under the age of four attend daycare centers and nurseries, as opposed to 16% of Jewish children in the same age group). The report further indicates that the shortage of licensed daycare centers stems in part from the fact that Arab local authorities lack the resources to fund such facilities and the scarcity of public land.<sup>19</sup>

Data collected by Sikkuy-Aufoq also points to disparities between Jewish and Arab societies, with a fivefold difference in the number of daycare centers. While in Jewish local authorities there is one daycare center for every 200 children, in Arab localities there is one for every 990 children. A position paper published in 2019 lists the barriers that prevent Arab local authorities from building licensed nurseries for infants under the age of three: lack of public land, taxing bureaucratic and planning requirements, such as presenting a building permit based on an approved blueprint, as well as the fact that mothers working part-time jobs, which account for one third of Arab women, are not eligible for subsidies under the existing system. Sikkuy-Aufoq points out that the root of the problem lies in the government's failure to address the unique situation of Arab local authorities and that the responsibility for removing the barriers lies with the various government ministries.<sup>20</sup>

A special report by the State Comptroller from 2022 also points to a shortage of daycare centers in Arab communities and a low percentage of toddlers attending subsidized facilities. It notes that of the efforts made in 2015-2020 to increase the number of daycare centers eligible for subsidies, only 10% of those built with funding from the Labor Ministry's Daycare Department were located in Arab localities. The report also shows that while Arab kids make up 24% of all toddlers in Israel, they received only 8% of the subsidy budget in 2020.<sup>21</sup> Considering that Arab society suffers from high poverty rates, these figures indicate that the disparities between Arab and Jewish society in availability and subsidization of daycare centers are not likely to be closed any time soon, a fact that negatively affects the promotion of employment for Arab women.<sup>22</sup>

This being the case, a central barrier to the participation of Arab women in the labor market remains unresolved. As a result, Arab women are forced to come up with alternative solutions, such as relying on unpaid caregiving within their family circle by mothers and

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<sup>19</sup> Orly Almagor-Lotan and Hodaya Kinn, [Licensed Daycare Center for Toddlers in Arab Sector](#), *Knesset Research and Information Center*, 7 July 2008.

<sup>20</sup> [Construction of Daycare Centers in Arab Localities: Barriers and Policy Recommendations](#), *Sikkuy-Aufoq*, July 2019.

<sup>21</sup> [Toddlers Care and Education in Daycare Centers](#), *State Comptroller*, May 2022.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

mothers-in-law, which is one of the reasons for the high rates of early retirement among Arab women.<sup>23</sup>

### Zulat's Recommendations

The deep economic gaps between Arab and Jewish societies require a long-term commitment that is not contingent on the changing decisions of rotating governments, a commitment that should be anchored in law so as not to hinge on their political considerations or goodwill. Five-year plans, however good they may be, are temporary fixes for structural inequality but do not guarantee the equal realization of rights for Arab citizens in terms of the allocation of resources and basic services.

Zulat proposes three pieces of legislation aimed at increasing the participation rate of Arab women in the labor market, two of them dealing with public transportation in Arab communities and a third bill addressing the issue of daycare facilities:

### Proposed Legislation for Improving Public Transportation in Arab Communities

- Amend the Traffic Regulations to require the Ministry of Transportation to contemplate equitability factors and how to advance equality in public transportation when approving and budgeting for infrastructure and services; add a new clause empowering a local authority to revoke at any time the license of a bus service, both intercity and inter-community, if it fails to promote equal quality, availability, and accessibility of public transportation.
- Establish in the Traffic Ordinance the obligation to appoint a council for the promotion of equality in public transportation, to be composed of representatives of the public, relevant government ministries, the Federation of Local Authorities, the Authority for Economic Development of Minority Sectors, and the Organization of Regional Councils. The council will act as an advisory body to the Minister of Transportation on matters related to promoting equality in public transportation, focusing on the quality, availability, and accessibility of services in terms of free movement, employment, and reduced social, economic, and gender gaps. It will also serve as a collaborative and consultative body that will accept opinions from civil

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<sup>23</sup> Maha Karkabi-Sabbah, Sami Miari, and Amalia Sa'ar, [\\*Early Retirement Under Gender and Ethnic Marginalization: Evidence From Palestinian Arab Women in Israel](#), *Arab Economic Forum*, June 2023.



**society organizations in order to assess the suitability of public transportation services for different populations, such as women, minorities, the elderly, and people with disabilities.** It will also consult with residents, local authorities, and other stakeholders, and will submit recommendations for promoting equality in public transportation at the local and regional levels. **The bill also proposes that the minister in charge submit an annual report to the Knesset Economic Committee presenting the steps taken to promote equality in public transportation.**

### **Proposed Bill to Address the Lack of Daycare Facilities in Arab Communities**

- Amend the Law on Supervision Daycare Centers for Toddlers **to require the minister in charge to submit an annual report to the Knesset's Education, Culture, and Sports Committee detailing the licensing and supervisory measures taken in connection with subsidies, quality, availability, and accessibility of daycare facilities for toddlers.** This reporting mechanism would enable better oversight of the implementation of equality within and between communities concerning daycare services, thereby improving the realization of the rights of Arab women in Israel.

This policy paper is based on a comprehensive report on the main barriers to the employment of Arab women in Israel drafted for Zulat for Equality and Human Rights by Attorney Shirin Batshon. [Click here to read the full report.](#)