

Public Transportation as Central Barrier to Arab Women's Participation in Labor Market

Challenges, Gaps, and Policy Recommendations for Promoting Equality

There is consensus in the academic and professional literature regarding the lack of adequate public transportation in Arab localities as a central barrier to the participation of Arab women in Israel's labor market and to the realization of the economic potential of the Arab population in general.¹

The 2019 State Comptroller's Report drew attention to the problem and recommended that the Transportation Ministry take significant steps to address the issue and to improve the poor accessibility to public transportation in Arab localities. It emphasized the need for a structured and binding policy that would ensure equal access to public transportation services, both within Arab localities and between them and places of employment and essential services:

"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 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."²

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 dire economic situation and unavailability of employment in most Arab municipalities.

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

¹ [Advancement of Public Transportation in Non-Jewish Localities](#), *State Comptroller's Special Report*, 13 March 2019.

² [State's Actions to Encourage Integration of Arab Population in Labor Force](#), *State Comptroller's Annual Report*, 24 May 2016.

Gender-Responsive Public Transportation

The work patterns of women, especially Arab women, who prefer to work close to home due to the double burden of paid work and caregiving responsibilities for children and the household, further limit their access to employment opportunities. To wit, a study conducted for the National Insurance Institute in 2018 found that access to the workplace is the most important factor for the integration of Arab women with academic degrees into the labor market.³

In light of the fact that women rely more on public transportation than men, the recognition has grown globally, in developing countries as well, of the need to develop gender-responsive transportation that meets women's needs and ensures a secure space safe from sexual assault or harassment during and en route to bus rides.⁴ A 2011 survey conducted among 500 women in Tel Aviv shows that one in four women experienced sexual harassment or indecent acts on public transportation, and that one in five witnessed such incidents. The Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women has addressed this issue over the years and promoted awareness campaigns about sexual harassment on public transportation,⁵ and the issue has also been discussed by the Knesset Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women.⁶

The use of public transportation by women has unique patterns, partly due to the double burden of paid work and childcare. Compared to men, women make more trips per day but for shorter distances, and have a hard time traveling comfortably as they are saddled with young children, strollers, and shopping bags.⁷

In other words, a policy that aims to encourage women to use public transportation must take their specific needs into account, including the aforementioned secure space, and therefore integrate these considerations into decision-making processes at all stages of planning.⁸

³ 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.

⁴ International Transport Forum, [*Women's Safety and Security: A Public Transport Priority](#), OECD Publishing, 2018.

⁵ [Implementation of Law for Prevention of Sexual Harassment](#), State Comptroller's Annual Report 70b, 4 May 2020.

⁶ [Committee Chair MK Touma-Suleiman: Measures to Prevent Sexual Harassment on Public Transportation Unclear, We Must All Take Responsibility for Our Public Space!](#) Knesset News, 21 March 2016.

⁷ Yael Hasson and Marianna Polevoy, [*Gender Equality Initiatives in Transportation Policy](#), Adva Center, July 2011.

⁸ Ibid.

Government Resolutions to Improve Public Transportation in Arab Localities

The state of public transportation in Arab localities is poor, with significant gaps compared to Jewish localities in terms of road infrastructure, service accessibility, and availability. These gaps did not arise by chance but stem from a long-standing policy of discrimination and inadequate treatment by Israeli governments over decades.⁹ Nevertheless, in recent years, major government resolutions regarding economic development in Arab society addressed the development of public transportation. These are also known as the **five-year plans for Arab society**:

- **Resolution No. 922** proclaimed the achievement by 2022 of full equality in the level of public transportation services between comparable Jewish and "minority localities" in three key parameters: frequency of service, coverage area, and number of destinations. As of 2016, at least 40% of the total investment in infrastructure in non-urban areas would be earmarked for the development of road infrastructure in Arab localities, starting with 45% in 2016. The resolution was expected to significantly increase the number of projects and the scope of investment in roads in such localities, particularly major traffic arteries.¹⁰
- **Resolution No. 550** states that the Ministry of Transportation, the Treasury, and the Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab, Druze and Circassian Sector (AEDA) would examine the possibility of budgeting projects, as of the last quarter of 2021, without detracting from the ministry's commitment under Government Resolution No. 922. Other clauses in the resolution addressed the expansion of public transportation services in Arab localities, construction of accessible bus stops for people with disabilities, and the assignation of bus-only lanes.¹¹

These decisions are commendable but insufficient given the vast disparities between Jewish and Arab local authorities. First, it should be noted that they lack a gender perspective and analysis that takes into account the different patterns of use of public transportation by men and women. Furthermore, the Transportation Ministry's metrics do not necessarily reflect the depth of the disparities, as their calculation is quantitative and

⁹ [Advancement of Public Transportation in Non-Jewish Localities](#), *State Comptroller's Special Report*, 13 March 2019.

¹⁰ [Government Actions for Economic Development of Minority Populations in 2016-2020: Government Resolution No. 922](#), *Prime Minister's Office*, 31 December 2015.

¹¹ [Economic Plan for Reducing Gaps in Arab Society by 2026: Government Resolution No. 550](#), *Prime Minister's Office*, 24 October 2021.

do not assess the level and quality of service, which significantly impacts the potential use of public transportation.¹²

A study conducted by Sikkuy-Aufoq based on such criteria as number of residents, socio-economic status, etc. shows that the level of service in Arab localities is for the most part lower than in Jewish ones. For example, frequency of service per week and average number of external destinations in Jewish localities is 1.5 times higher and the average number of available bus routes is 2.5 times higher.¹³ Noting the Ministry's unfamiliarity with the needs and conditions in Arab localities, the study proposes to engage in regular consultations with the residents, the transportation board of the National Committee of Heads of Arab Localities, and professionals as a prerequisite for the implementation of a policy to reduce gaps.

A special report prepared by the Knesset Research and Information Center in 2016 points to poor quality of service and disparities between Arab and Jewish localities, as well as the lack of annual reports comparing the level of public transportation service in localities with comparable characteristics.¹⁴ A special State Comptroller report on public transportation in Arab localities also points to many deficiencies in the execution of plans, including lack of control over private public transportation, non-mapping of existing infrastructure, and the overall absence of a broad vision about the entire Arab population.¹⁵ The report indicates two serious problems:

1. Lack of a comprehensive and integrated blueprint to ensure the realization of goals and closure of Arab-Jewish gaps: In Resolution No. 922 the government set a goal to fully reduce gaps by 2022. However, a blueprint to ascertain whether goals have been realized and existing resources (including dedicated budgets) enable their realization has yet to be finalized.¹⁶ It should be noted that a master plan for the Arab communities was published in 2019, but it included no clear goals for the future or oversight mechanisms.¹⁷

¹² Inna Branzburg, Omar Mansour, and Muammar Abu-Ahmad, [Gaps in Public Transportation Services Between Arab and Jewish Localities in Israel: Comparative Study](#), *Sikkuy-Aufoq*, 9 February 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rinat Benita and Sharon Sofer, [Public Transportation Services in Arab Localities: Situation Report](#), *Knesset Research and Information Center*, 18 February 2016.

¹⁵ [State's Actions to Encourage Integration of Arab Population in Labor Force](#), *State Comptroller's Annual Report*, 24 May 2016.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ [Master Plan for Public Transportation in Arab Localities](#), *Ministry of Transportation and Road Safety/National Public Transportation Authority*, August 2019.

2. Lack of a transparent procedure setting prioritization criteria to ensure equality among Arab localities:

The State Comptroller recommended setting criteria based on an equitable and transparent procedure to avoid the creation of gaps between Arab localities with dire public transportation needs that have not been allocated the necessary resources and localities that have seen investments.¹⁸ A 2012 Sikkuy-Aufoq report affirmed that local Arab authorities were unaware of the resources available to them for the purpose of improving public transportation and that the Transportation Ministry did not avail them with all the necessary information about the types of service the Ministry itself can provide, which is why in many cases these resources remained unused.¹⁹

Zulat's Recommendations

In a reality where Arab localities face infrastructure gaps amounting to billions of shekels and where needs continue to grow from one government decision to the next, it is not enough to allocate budgets that rely on temporary budget allocations within five-year plans. These plans depend on the goodwill of changing governments, which are sometimes driven by political considerations or international pressures, such as the wish to improve Israel's ranking in OECD indices. Therefore, what is needed is a binding commitment anchored in law to ensure the long-term allocation of resources and reduce structural gaps in a way that is not subject to frequent policy changes.

Zulat drafted two legislative proposals aimed at improving public transportation in Arab localities:

- 1. Amend the Traffic Regulations to require the Transportation Ministry to contemplate equitability factors and to consider 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.**
- 2. 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 AEDA, and**

¹⁸ [State's Actions to Encourage Integration of Arab Population in Labor Force](#), *State Comptroller's Annual Report*, 24 May 2016.

¹⁹ Hagit Naali-Joseph and Tobi Cohen, [From Barriers to Opportunities: Public Transportation in Arab Communities](#), *Sikkuy-Aufoq*, November 2012.

the Organization of Regional Councils. **The council will act as an advisory body to the transportation minister 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 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.**

These legislative proposals aim to ensure that the question of public transportation in Arab localities remains a constant item on the agendas of the government and the Transportation Ministry and is not forgotten or sidelined due to political considerations. The overarching goal is to promote an equitable allocation of resources to consistently implement the right to equality and base it on solid foundations.

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.](#)