

7. Women's Leadership in Economic Change in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel



Women from Nazareth commemorate International Women's Day as a day of struggle

Arab-Israeli women are one of the most marginalised and invisible groups within Israeli society. Many have been adversely affected by the 'Wisconsin Plan', a welfare-to-work programme introduced by the Israeli government in 2005, that Oxfam's partner, Sawt el-Amel, has been active in opposing. In response to the hardship that the plan has brought to themselves and their families, women have become active in leading popular opposition to the Plan. This is a significant and unprecedented move in their conservative communities, where women's presence in the public sphere has traditionally not been accepted.

Background

The Arab minority in Israel are among the poorest and most marginalised within Israeli society. In addition to high levels of unemployment, many have little education, and access to basic services is limited.¹ The number of Arab women registered as 'unemployed' is particularly high, for two reasons. Women who identify themselves as housewives, and who live in households that are dependent on benefits, have to register as unemployed, even though they may be fully occupied with household responsibilities and looking after children. If they fail to do so, their husbands will also lose access to benefits, putting the welfare of the whole family in jeopardy. And Arab women who do want to enter the job market face a range of obstacles, from low levels of education and professional skills and a poor command of Hebrew, to a lack of demand for female Arab workers, and inadequate public transport, making it very difficult for them to travel to work.² These barriers are compounded by gender norms that see women's role as confined to the home, making it very difficult for women to be active in public life.

The Wisconsin Plan

In the context of high levels of unemployment within the Arab community, as well as elsewhere in Israel, in 2005 the Israeli government introduced a new job-placement programme for the 'chronically unemployed', known as the Wisconsin Plan.³ The Plan is implemented by private employment agencies, and currently affects 14,000 households in Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Hadera, and Nazareth/Upper Nazareth. The dual aims of the project are to help those who have been without work for a long time back into employment, and out of poverty, and to cut public spending on welfare benefits by 35 per cent: the companies running the programme face sanctions if they do not succeed in doing this. People receiving state unemployment benefits in areas where the programme is being implemented now *have* to attend the Wisconsin Plan centres for up to 40 hours a week, and they *have* to accept any job offered to them by the employment agencies, or participate in voluntary work. Anyone who fails to do so loses the right to claim benefits. If a family is dependent on state benefits, both spouses have to attend, even if one is fully occupied caring for young children at home.⁴ As women are far more likely to be in this position, they are being disproportionately affected by the scheme.

Challenging an exploitative system

Sawt el-Amel (the Laborer's Voice) was established in 1999 by Arab workers from Nazareth. Its aim is to support low-income and unemployed Arab-Israeli citizens experiencing discrimination in the labour market and the welfare system. This is achieved through a range of activities including collective and individual legal action,

¹ **7. Women's Leadership in Economic Change in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel**, Women's Leadership & Participation, Programme Insights, Oxfam GB. February 2008

advocacy, and campaigns raising awareness about employment and welfare issues among the Arab-Israeli population.⁵ Concerns that the implementation of the Wisconsin Plan was having an adverse effect on Arab-Israeli citizens prompted Sawt el-Amel to open an 'Alternative Wisconsin Centre', established with the support of Oxfam GB. This provides information and legal services to people affected by the scheme, helping them to find decent work outside the framework of the Wisconsin Plan, and undertakes advocacy work as well.⁶

Participatory needs assessment (PNA)

The establishment of the Alternative Wisconsin Centre brought Sawt el-Amel activists into contact with both men and women affected by the Wisconsin Plan, and made them realise that they needed more specific information about how the Plan was impacting on women. In light of this, and the fact that women made up the majority of Wisconsin Plan participants,⁷ Sawt el-Amel applied to Oxfam GB for funding to carry out a participatory needs assessment (PNA). The PNA would help them to find out more about women's experiences of the Wisconsin Plan, in order to provide more targeted assistance to their women clients, to inform advocacy work, and by extension prevent the exploitation of Arab women by Wisconsin Centres and employers.⁸

As part of the PNA, Sawt el-Amel organised meetings and focus groups for women and men to discuss their concerns and experiences relating to specific topics, such as health rights and the Wisconsin Plan, and children and the Wisconsin Plan. Women Wisconsin Plan participants also spoke to people attending the Wisconsin Centres, reporting back to Sawt el-Amel on their conversations. Coming into contact with these women in this way encouraged more people to visit Sawt el-Amel's Alternative Wisconsin Centre, where staff were able to collect 100 testimonies from people affected by the Plan.⁹

As anticipated, the results of the PNA showed that women were particularly vulnerable to exploitation within the Wisconsin Plan framework. Women's lack of formal education, experience of public life, and familiarity with the benefits system were, Sawt el-Amel argues, exploited by the Wisconsin Centres, where women clients often faced verbal harassment and humiliation.¹⁰ A year into working with women Wisconsin Plan participants, Sawt el-Amel stated that in Nazareth, it could not report a single successful case of a woman participant obtaining decent employment via the scheme.¹¹ Some women were sent as day labourers to kibbutzim,¹² and had to work in very harsh conditions, for which they were never actually paid. This had the knock-on effect of workers who were already employed as labourers being dismissed, as it was cheaper for employers to use Wisconsin participants. Some women were offered shift work in

factories that they could not reach by public transport in time to start work at the beginning of their shifts, and were classed as 'refusing to work' and denied access to benefits when they explained this.¹³ The authorities were forced to pay the withheld benefits to these women when Sawt el-Amel appealed on their behalf. Others were not offered any work, because there simply was none available, and yet they were still expected to attend the Wisconsin Centre on a regular basis. When women refused to co-operate, they faced sanctions, principally denial of state benefits. Talking to Sawt el-Amel was seen as a form of 'non-co-operation', effectively obstructing the rights of Wisconsin Plan participants to access support and legal advice. Indeed, 15 women who took part in a protest at one of the Wisconsin Centres had their benefits cut as a result; lawyers instructed by Sawt el-Amel appealed on behalf of these women, and their benefits were reinstated.¹⁴

One issue identified by many of the women who participated in the PNA was the failure of the Wisconsin Plan to make any allowances for people with young children. Some of the women who were participating in the Wisconsin Plan were registered as unemployed and wanted to find paid employment, but over 60 per cent of women respondents did not actually classify themselves as 'unemployed', but rather as housewives, whose primary role was to take care of their children, but who were part of households reliant on state benefits. These women were still expected to attend the Wisconsin Centre 'full-time', for up to 40 hours a week, and to take any employment offered to them; failure to do so could mean jeopardising the entire household's access to benefits.¹⁵ As no child-care facilities were provided, women often had to leave children unattended while they visited the Centre or went out to work, potentially putting their children's safety at risk. Many women also felt guilty that they were not fulfilling their responsibilities towards their children, which they considered their primary role. For some, this was very disempowering, as they associated it with losing the authority and status that they enjoyed within the home as mothers.¹⁶ That said, this emphasis on motherhood and their responsibilities within the home did not mean that women were not committed to bringing about socio-economic change for themselves and their families, and many saw participating in the PNA as a means of being proactively involved in doing just that.¹⁷

Women leaders: moving from passivity to action

The Women's Platform

Some of the women who gave their views during the PNA decided that they wanted to do more to measure the impact of the Wisconsin Plan on women in particular, and to provide assistance to other women affected by the Plan. Together they formed the 'Women's

Platform' in September 2005, which now has five permanent active members (four of whom have been through the Wisconsin Plan themselves), as well as over 40 other members who are involved in the Platform's activities. Working closely with the Popular Committee against the Wisconsin Plan, an independent monitoring body facilitated by Sawt el-Amel, the Women's Platform has a presence at the two Wisconsin Centres in Nazareth. This means that members are able to provide moral support, legal advice, and general information to women affected by the Plan, as well as collecting information from those women about their experiences. The Women's Platform has been able to reach over 3000 women in this way, collecting comprehensive information that has been used to inform Sawt el-Amel's campaigning and advocacy work, as well as referring individual women in need of specific legal advice to Sawt el-Amel's legal clinic. This has resulted in Sawt el-Amel winning a number of important test cases on behalf of women workers.¹⁸ In addition, lobbying informed by the Women's Platform and its members' experiences of the Wisconsin Plan has resulted in legislated changes to the Plan, meaning in particular that unemployed single women with children under the age of 12 are now no longer expected to attend the Wisconsin Centre full-time.¹⁹

The first demonstrations against the Plan were led by men, but members of the Women's Platform have become more and more actively involved in organising public demonstrations, gradually assuming leadership of the public struggle against the Wisconsin Plan.²⁰ This has included members of the Women's Platform organising and participating in sit-ins at Wisconsin Centres and a demonstration to mark International Women's Day in 2006; requesting Sawt el-Amel to organise workshops and lectures on the Wisconsin Plan and workers' rights in relation to it; and speaking at conferences held in Israel, and abroad.²¹

The fact that the women active in Sawt el-Amel's Women's Platform have succeeded in attaining prominent positions of leadership within the campaign against the Wisconsin Plan is extremely significant. Arab-Israeli society is traditionally very patriarchal, with women's mobility and activity outside the home closely controlled by male relatives, leaving women for the most part marginalised and invisible in any public activities. This is compounded by the discrimination that they face from the Israeli state and the general public.²² But in addition to their anger at the way the Plan has exploited those expected to participate, women are also angered by the fact that women with children are being forced out of their homes, in what is seen as an attack on the home and the family, the foundations of many women's sense of who they are and where their responsibilities lie. Their contact with the Women's Platform has helped them realise that they have the right, and indeed the responsibility, to take action against the scheme and the harm it is doing to their families and communities.²³ In so doing, the enormous potential of these women

to bring about positive change as leaders in their communities has been unlocked, and they have shown an unexpected degree of motivation and determination.²⁴ At an individual level, Sawt el-Amel report that there is a noticeable difference in the way that women who are involved in the Platform's activities perceive themselves; they now have the skills and self-confidence to stand up for their own and their families' rights in public.²⁵

Changing power relations

The support that the women active in Sawt el-Amel have received from the men in their community is also noteworthy. Initially some male relatives did try to prevent women from attending meetings and demonstrations, using the excuse that this might mean that they would be singled out as troublemakers and be penalised by Wisconsin Centre staff, potentially losing access to benefits.²⁶ But on the whole, men have come to be very supportive of the women's activism, with many ultimately agreeing to take part in events organised and led by the Women's Platform,²⁷ an 'unprecedented social revolution' in terms of gender relations in Arab-Israeli society.²⁸ Men in the community (and in Sawt el-Amel itself) seem to have realised, and to appreciate, the benefits of women's shared participation in the struggle against the Wisconsin Plan, particularly relating to shared common interests such as the right to decent work, and the welfare of children, and now welcome the leadership of women in that struggle as well.²⁹ Indeed, the Women's Platform is now fully integrated into the leadership structure of Sawt el-Amel, with members representing the organisation at external conferences and events, including events outside of Israel. It is also the most active branch of the Alternative Wisconsin Centre.³⁰

The effect of women campaigning on the Wisconsin Plan has been to achieve changes in gender power relations in these communities, but this has happened almost without men noticing. Indeed, it can be argued that the Women's Platform has been so successful in motivating women to act, and in maintaining men's support for that action, precisely because it has never sought to overtly challenge existing ideas about gender roles and relations in Arab-Israeli society.³¹ Rather, it has been able to show the benefits to the whole community, men included, of women's activism and their increased role in public life, and it is through recognising and appreciating these benefits that men have begun to demonstrate that they have altered their views on how women and men should behave.

For instance, no discussion was initiated by Sawt el-Amel regarding whether men taking on more responsibility for child-care would be one solution to the difficulties faced by women participating in the Wisconsin Plan,³² but it is clear that some 'renegotiation' and redistribution of gender roles and responsibilities must have taken place within the households of these new women activists, in order

for them to have the time to participate in this activism on a regular basis, and to travel to attend conferences and events. In particular, the attendance of Women's Platform members at trade-union conferences held in Belgium and France could not have happened without some shift in men's attitudes and power relations occurring within those women's households.³³

At present such conclusions may be speculative, and the issue of how far women's public participation in resistance to the Wisconsin Plan has altered gendered power relations within households would be an interesting topic for future investigation. However, that women are now taking responsibility for themselves, their husbands, and their children in the public sphere and that men are respecting and even encouraging their right to do so, is, in the words of a senior staff member at Sawt el-Amel, little short of 'revolutionary', given the context in which this has taken place.³⁴ And the fact that men do not feel threatened by this indicates that these changes are likely to be sustained, although this will need to be monitored in the long run. As a strategy for bringing about change, it is debatable whether prompting a direct discussion on existing gender roles would have been anywhere near as effective.

Further leadership development training

It has become clear that members of the Women's Platform are now the driving force behind social activism against the Wisconsin Plan. Their determination and commitment has enabled them to attain key leadership positions within Sawt el-Amel, with several now active on the organisation's steering committee. This is a major change for the organisation. As Sawt el-Amel's director put it, five years ago, having women active on the Steering Committee of the organisation would have been unthinkable.³⁵ The fact that they are now in this position indicates the degree to which women's activities against the Wisconsin Plan have challenged gendered power relations within this community.

Being active on the Steering Committee allows Women's Platform members to contribute to the strategic development of Sawt el-Amel, ensuring that further projects aimed specifically at women are developed, and that a gender perspective is integrated into Sawt el-Amel's overall programme.³⁶ As such, the Women's Platform is now in a position to consider activities that support people affected by the Wisconsin Plan, and potentially address the more general socio-economic vulnerability and lack of economic independence of Arab-Israeli women, through for instance exploring opportunities for income generation and skills development, and addressing the issue of lack of access to reliable public transport.³⁷ Other activities will include ongoing community activism, providing legal support in

individual cases, and developing alliances with other organisations which can advocate for change from outside Israel.³⁸

Recognising that activism against the Wisconsin Plan unlocked enormous potential in the women participants, but that these activists still needed training and support to develop their leadership skills to operate in public and professional environments,³⁹ the Women's Platform of Sawt el-Amel with support from Oxfam GB launched a 'Grassroots Women's Leadership Development' project. This has provided the opportunity for Arab-Israeli women to develop the skills to stand up for their rights, advocate on behalf of themselves and their families and communities, and become effective leaders. It is hoped that this will eventually lead to a greater number of Arab women active in the public sphere as formal and informal leaders and spokespersons, increasing the visibility of Arab women in Israeli society, and helping, ultimately, to improve their socio-economic status and economic independence.⁴⁰ The determination of the members of the Women's Platform has sparked off a new wave of social activism, led by those who are among the most vulnerable in Arab-Israeli society; Sawt el-Amel is committed to supporting this, in order to help it to grow and flourish.

Notes

- ¹ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) 'Arab Women in Israel's Wisconsin Plan: A Participatory Needs Assessment', Nazareth: Sawt el-Amel.
- ² Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) 'Final Report'.
- ³ This programme is known as the Wisconsin Plan as this type of 'welfare-to-work' scheme was first implemented in the American state of Wisconsin in the mid 1990s. www.workersadvicecenter.org/Sept_05/Wisconsin.htm (last accessed September 2007).
- ⁴ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*
- ⁵ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2007) 'Project Proposal: Grassroots Women's Leadership Development', Nazareth: Sawt el-Amel.
- ⁶ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ⁷ Sawt el-Amel (2007a) 'Work in Progress: Annual Report 2006', Nazareth: Sawt el-Amel, http://laborers-voice.org/files/AnnualReport_2006_per_cent5Bgeneral_per_cent5D.pdf (last accessed December 2007).
- ⁸ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*
- ⁹ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ¹⁰ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*; Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ¹¹ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.* Of course, this needs to be considered in light of the fact that people usually only approach Sawt el-Amel when they are in difficulties, so cannot be taken as representative.
- ¹² A kibbutz is a collective farm.
- ¹³ Sawt el-Amel (2007a) *op.cit.*
- ¹⁴ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ¹⁵ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*; Sawt el-Amel (2006b) 'Major Victory for Civil Society Struggle against the Wisconsin Plan', press release, 21 September 2006, Sawt el-Amel: Nazareth, http://laborers-voice.org/files/060921_Yishai.pdf (last accessed December 2007).
- ¹⁶ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ¹⁷ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2007b) 'Project Proposal: Grassroots Women's Leadership Development', Nazareth: Sawt el-Amel.
- ¹⁸ Sawt el-Amel (2007a) *op.cit.* For further examples of test cases brought on behalf of women denied access to benefits for 'refusing to work', see www.laborers-voice.org.
- ¹⁹ Sawt el-Amel (2006b) *op.cit.* These changes also affect men and women who are within seven years of retiring, the long-term unemployed, and those with physical or mental health problems.
- ²⁰ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ²¹ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*; Sawt el-Amel (2007b) *op.cit.*

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- ²² Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*
- ²³ Interview with Marie Badarne (Head of Research and Development, Sawt el-Amel) and Wehbe Badarne (Director, Sawt el-Amel), 2007.
- ²⁴ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2007b) *op.cit.*
- ²⁵ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*; Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ²⁶ Interview with Marie Badarne (Head of Research and Development, Sawt el-Amel) and Wehbe Badarne (Director, Sawt el-Amel), 2006.
- ²⁷ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*; Interview with Marie Badarne and Wehbe Badarne (2006) *op.cit.*
- ²⁸ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*
- ³¹ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Interview with Marie Badarne and Wehbe Badarne (2007) *op.cit.*
- ³⁴ Interview with Marie Badarne and Wehbe Badarne (2006) *op.cit.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2007b) *op.cit.*
- ³⁷ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2005) *op.cit.*; Interview with Marie Badarne and Wehbe Badarne (2006) *op.cit.*; Interview with Marie Badarne and Wehbe Badarne (2007) *op.cit.*
- ³⁸ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2006a) *op.cit.*
- ³⁹ Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice (2007b) *op.cit.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Cover photograph: Sawt el-Amel, 2006

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