



**Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice  
Defending the Rights of Unemployed and  
Working Poor Arab Citizens of Israel**

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## **Arab Women in Israel's Wisconsin Plan: A Participatory Needs Assessment**

*With the support of the OXFAM MEEECIS Gender Innovations Fund, Sawt el-Amel: The Laborer's Voice facilitated a participatory needs assessment among 1,000 Arab women from Nazareth who participate in the welfare-to work project "Wisconsin Plan". The rationale and outcomes of this initiative, which was carried about between September and December 2005, are summarised in this report and presented on behalf of the Women's Platform, a grassroots activist forum established by participants of this project.*

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Nazareth,  
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## 1) Assumptions: Why was a needs assessment conducted?

On 1 August 2005, the Israeli pilot project "Wisconsin Plan", a welfare-to-work programme for long-term unemployed, facilitated by four international private companies and their Israeli partner corporations, began for 14,000 welfare recipients in the regions Nazareth/Upper Nazareth, Ashkelon, Jerusalem (including neighbourhoods in occupied East Jerusalem), and Hadera (including seven Palestinian villages).<sup>i</sup> In case of "non-cooperation" or work refusal by a participant, his/her income benefits are cut for one or two months respectively. The companies had to save the state more than 35% of its welfare expenditures after the first six months; otherwise they would have been sanctioned. This objective was met. Participation in the Wisconsin Plan is compulsory for welfare recipients residing in the pilot areas. In Nazareth, the Wisconsin Plan is implemented by *Agam Mehalev Ltd.*, a consortium of an Israeli consultant company and *Alexander Calder Groep* from the Netherlands.

From the outset, *Sawt el-Amel* has been seriously concerned that the Wisconsin Plan would have a deteriorating rather than positive effect particularly on the Palestinian Arab citizens participating in the Plan. The following paragraphs are an excerpt of *Sawt el-Amel's* project proposal to Oxfam MEEECIS GIF:

"Our worries are based on both a general criticism of the Plan itself – e.g. the implementing manpower companies need to reduce public spending by more than 35%, otherwise the contractor will reduce their bonuses – and on the specific vulnerability of the Arab minority which is faced with structural deficits due to systematic discrimination in education, employment and infrastructure. Therefore, *Sawt el-Amel*, with the support of Oxfam GB, established the Alternative Wisconsin Centre in Nazareth in March 2005. The project provides information and legal service to the Nazareth community and conducts advocacy in order to ensure that basic socio-economic rights of the Wisconsin participants are safeguarded. [...]

In the early implementation phase, the project team realised that Palestinian Arab women are particularly vulnerable to the potential exploitative nature of the Wisconsin Plan. Arab women citizens of Israel are the least educated members of society, and only 17% of Arab women participate in the labour force as compared to 54% of Jewish women.

In working with the future Wisconsin participants, *Sawt el-Amel* identified the following obstacles Arab women face when required to attend the Wisconsin Centers and to accept any job offered by the manpower agencies:

- Extremely 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 due to all the above-mentioned factors.

These structural deficits cannot be remedied by a job placement programme aimed at short-term success. Therefore, *Sawt el-Amel* will embark on a participatory needs assessment within the framework of its Alternative Wisconsin Advise Centre. The outcome of this initiative will lead to activities that shall offer Arab women the opportunity to find decent work and care facilities for their children even beyond the framework of the Wisconsin Plan."

## 2) Methodology: How was the needs assessment conducted?

The rationale behind the needs assessment was very simple: the more members of the target group we consult, the better we can plan our intervention strategy. And if we want to get representative information and be effective, we need to take a participatory approach. In the course of this report, it will further become clear that this methodology achieved more than just providing reliable information about the needs of Arab women participants of the Wisconsin Plan.

*Sawt el-Amel* made use of various tools of information acquisition; however, the crucial aspect was the handing over of responsibilities to the target group. The original plan of action was soon reduced to being a mere yardstick for performance measurement, as the project developed its very own dynamics. The needs assessment was conducted in the following ways:

- Establishment of the Women's Platform, initially as an open forum for female Wisconsin participants to discuss and exchange views;
  - The Platform is steered by five women; app. 45 women regularly take part in its activities;
- Regular meetings organised by the Women's Platform;
  - Between September and December 2005, 14 meetings took place (average attendance: 20 women);
  - Each meeting had a specific topic, such as "Health Rights and the Wisconsin Plan", "Legal Regulations of the Wisconsin Plan", "Children and the Wisconsin Plan", "What to do about the Wisconsin Plan?" etc.;
  - *Sawt el-Amel's* Administrative Assistant (or another volunteer) kept minutes of each meeting;
- Women's Platform members volunteered as field workers
  - Platform members spoke with almost 1,000 Wisconsin participants (men and women) while they themselves were attending the centres;
  - The field workers reported (orally) to *Sawt el-Amel* on what they heard from the participants and what they considered to be important;
- Platform members' "field presence" made more people visit *Sawt el-Amel's* office;
  - *Sawt el-Amel* collected almost 100 testimonies from female Wisconsin participants who visited the office (the documents are archived in hardcopy);
- 50 female Wisconsin participants filled out a questionnaire at the end of the project;
- At a meeting in June 2006, the Women's Platform officially assumed responsibility for the development of a Women's Department at *Sawt el-Amel*.

### The Women's Platform is steered by:

Ms. Maha Abu Alwan (Wisconsin participant, unmarried, no children)

Ms. Areen Bsool (Wisconsin participant, Board Member *Sawt el-Amel*, unmarried, no children)

Ms. Zuheira Hassan (Wisconsin participant, Board Member *Sawt el-Amel*, married, five children)

Ms. Sahar Nijm (Administrative Assistant *Sawt el-Amel*, unmarried, no children)

Ms. Manal Sharara (Wisconsin participant, Board Member *Sawt el-Amel*, married, seven children)

### 3) Results: What did come out of the needs assessment?

On the whole, the needs assessment among Arab women participants of the Wisconsin Plan produced the expected result: women are more vulnerable to exploitation within the framework of the Wisconsin Plan, for exactly the reasons initially identified by *Sawt el-Amel*.

However, the initiative revealed a number of highly important details, such as the salience of issues, the diversity of the female Wisconsin clientele in Nazareth and the common problems shared by both women and men. The needs assessment moreover showed how seemingly "vulnerable" members of society – indigent women belonging to a national minority – develop strength in participatory actions.

The following sections summarise the main outcome of "Arab Women in Israel's Wisconsin Plan: A Participatory Needs Assessment".

#### **Housewives vs. Jobseekers: Not Every Woman Has the Same Needs**

The most basic outcome of the survey is that different women have different needs, and in relation to the Wisconsin Plan, there are two fundamental differences: between 35-40% of the female participants are seeking salaried work, while the others define themselves as full-time housewives and are thus not seeking employment outside their home. The crucial problem of the Wisconsin Plan is that, while it fails to offer solutions for the job-seekers, it forces housewives to attend the centres together with their unemployed or low-earning husbands and to leave their children at home unattended. In a questionnaire *Sawt el-Amel* put to 50 women, 18% answered that the biggest problem of the Wisconsin Plan is that "I am forced to attend the centres even if they cannot offer anything". Another 16% found the biggest problem to be that "the service in the centres is inadequate for my needs".<sup>ii</sup>

For *Sawt el-Amel's* intervention strategy that means that we have to address two main issues: one is the right to decent work including work-support services for working mothers (such as day care facilities) and the other is the protection of the family as the core structure of society.

#### **Job Market: Where Are the Jobs?**

As already pointed out in the previous section, the Wisconsin Plan fails to facilitate job placements for the simple reason that there are few jobs for Arab citizens in and around Nazareth in general and virtually no jobs for Arab women. The gender distinction is due to the fact that the majority of Arab men are employed in the construction business, a sector that requires physical strength and is traditionally occupied by men. In the Galilee, the majority of working Arab women used to be employed in garment factories, an industrial branch that almost completely disappeared from northern Israel after the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which led to the outsourcing of production to the cheap-labour neighbours.

After one whole year of working with Wisconsin Plan participants, *Sawt el-Amel* cannot quote a single success case of a female participant from Nazareth who has found decent employment. This is certainly not a representative statement since people usually approach *Sawt el-Amel* when they have problems and not when they are doing well. Nevertheless, the extensive field surveys carried out by *Sawt el-Amel* and the Women's Platform suggest that the Wisconsin Plan's success rate in Nazareth is indeed minimal.

**Maisa Hajj Yehya, 25,  
job-seeker:**

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

For instance, Ms. Maisa Hajj Yehya, a young woman who does want to work, 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. Neither did Ms. Hajj Yehya sign any work contract nor did she receive any salary for the days she worked. Hundreds of women share the same fate. Maisa Hajj Yehya asks: "Where are the real jobs? They handle us like day labourers – but without contracts, without payment. We are trafficked like slaves."

### Children: "Let Them Roam the Streets..."

The Wisconsin Administration's disregard for the needs of the participants' approximately 4,000 children (below 18) is the most serious social problem identified by the Women's Platform. Every day, hundreds of children are left without a guardian while their parents are attending the Wisconsin centres. Apart from serious accidents – e.g., two young children were hit by a car while unattended, one went missing, one fainted in the Wisconsin centre and had to be hospitalised – tens of mothers and fathers mentioned to *Sawt el-Amel* and the Women's Platform that their children's performance in school had suffered because of the lack of tutoring at home. Moreover, many mothers feel disempowered because the Wisconsin Plan prevents them from fulfilling their responsibility towards their children. Ms. Manal Abdeljawwad, whose daughter got hit by a car while she was in the Wisconsin centre, explains: "The Wisconsin Plan changed my whole life. I used to lead the household and help the children with their homework. They [the Wisconsin Plan] have taken this away from me. I'm no longer in charge."



Manal Abdeljawwad and her daughter Shaima' (5)

**Manal Abdeljawwad, 35, housewife, three children:**

***"The Wisconsin Plan changed my whole life. I used to lead the household and help the children with their homework. They have taken this away from me. I'm no longer in charge."***

Ms. Abdeljawwad is also outraged about the disrespectful behaviour of the Wisconsin Plan officials. She told *Sawt el-Amel* that her case manager commented on her daughter's accident: "Let them [the children] roam the streets; it's none of our business." And again, Manal Abdeljawwad's story is not an individual case, but an example for close to a hundred personal accounts of mothers forced to attend the Wisconsin Plan.

The Women's Platform believes that mothers should have the choice to stay at home and be a full-time housewife. At the same time, the Platform identified the lack of work-support services (day care, long school day, youth clubs) as a major obstacle to sustainable employment for mothers. The discussion of a change in traditional gender roles – i.e. working mother and "house-husband" - did not come up.

## **Empowerment: Exploitation and Humiliation are Part of the Wisconsin Participants' Daily Life**

Another noteworthy outcome of the assessment is the appalling degree to which the women participants' alleged (and actual) vulnerability is exploited by the Wisconsin Administration and its employees. The spectrum of mistreatment ranges from insults over psychological warfare to outright exploitation.

A large number of women reported that their case managers verbally harassed them; others felt physically humiliated. For instance, during a cosmetics course held inside the Wisconsin centre, the participating women were asked to depilate their legs in front of all other people who were present in the centre, including men. Women who refuse to participate in such activities are often sanctioned, i.e. their family's income benefits are cut for one month. *Sawt el-Amel* found that a considerable majority of the over 1,000 sanctioned participants (until January 2006) were women who lost their benefits for being "uncooperative" or "defiant". 15 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 that their income benefits would be cut if they cooperate with *Sawt el-Amel*.

***"I want to see your manicured fingers dig in the dirt!"***

Hundreds of women participants are trafficked as day labourers without any rights. They work for several days as farm hands in bad working conditions (e.g. without a bathroom) until they are passed on to the next menial job. Usually, they are not paid for their work. Not only does this practise violate the basic rights of the Wisconsin Plan participants, it also leads to lay-offs in formerly sustainable work places, as the participants substitute the salaried employees. One woman,<sup>1</sup> who was sent to dig out potatoes in a kibbutz, told the Women's Platform that her employer shouted: "I want to see your manicured fingers dig in the dirt!"

The Women's Platform identified empowerment and awareness-raising among Arab women as the central tools to prevent exploitation and discrimination. Hundreds of women – and also a large number of men – lose the income benefits they are entitled to or are exploited at work because they are uninformed about their rights and lack the self-confidence to take action when they feel discriminated against. We believe that Nazareth's Wisconsin Plan participants were unlawfully and deliberately deprived of thousands of US Dollars worth of income benefits and salaries because Wisconsin officials and employers relied on the participants' – particularly the women's - "ignorance" and inaction.

## **Gender Mainstreaming: Common Problems, Common Goals**

In Arab society in Nazareth, gender roles are clearly distinguished, particularly among the most disadvantaged, which make up the clientele of the Wisconsin Plan. Many women feel uncomfortable in the company of men they do not know, and most consider their primary social responsibility to be housewife and mother. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be the breadwinners and public representatives of the family. High unemployment rates and the design of the Wisconsin Plan, which requires both men and women to attend, disrupt this social pattern without offering sustainable alternatives.

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<sup>1</sup> The participant preferred to remain anonymous.



In Nazareth's traditional society, gender roles are clearly defined. The common struggle against the Wisconsin Plan, however, brings men, women and children together in the public sphere.

(Photos: first major demonstration in Nazareth, August 2005; women at May Day protest, 2006; Nazareth's Wisconsin Plan participants demonstrate in front of the Knesset, June 2006)

This unwanted social revolution affects everyone, men and women alike, and the first year of implementation of the Wisconsin Plan has seen unprecedented public activism, where men and women protested side by side for their social and economic rights. While the first major demonstration organised by *Sawt el-Amel* and the Popular Committee against the Wisconsin Plan (a public monitoring body established with the support of *Sawt el-Amel*) in August 2005 was led by men, women gradually took over the leadership of the public struggle. Today, many men are supportive of their wives' or sisters' public demands for decent work and decent life, and many common issues arose.

For instance, the aspect of health rights affects all. Hundreds of participants were attested as able to work full-time by the Wisconsin Plan's physician, even though the National Insurance Institute or their personal doctors consider them unfit to work. Furthermore, defending the participants' children's rights is a common interest.

The positions held by the Women's Platform and the results of the needs assessment clearly show that the majority of Nazareth's female Wisconsin participants have no interest in changing the social *status quo* of distinct gender roles. However, at the same time, a large number of women have gained the self-confidence and basic skills to stand up for their own and their families' rights in public, and in most cases, the male Wisconsin participants have grown to respect the women's activism.

#### 4) Strategy: How can the results be used to improve our work?

The needs assessment among Arab women participants of the Wisconsin Plan has been of crucial importance for *Sawt el-Amel's* strategic planning. The overall outcome for *Sawt el-Amel* as an organisation was the decision to establish a Women's Department. The female constituency has become a pillar both of the organisation itself and of grassroots activism in Nazareth. Four female Wisconsin participants were elected to *Sawt el-Amel's* Board of Directors in July 2006, and the Women's Platform is increasingly taking responsibility to set up a women's grassroots activist forum going beyond the issue of the Wisconsin Plan and the borders of Nazareth municipality.

#### Community Activism

Work with the community will remain the basis of *Sawt el-Amel's* activities also in the future. The Women's Platform has gained momentum as a grassroots activist forum, and *Sawt el-Amel* will invest considerable efforts in supporting the Platform and in facilitating the development of a

women's department within the organisation, owned by the activists. Community activism is in itself an empowerment tool for women – and certainly also for men - as it brings them into the public sphere and requires the self-confidence to raise one's voice.

### **Leadership Development**

As mentioned above, neither *Sawt el-Amel* nor the Women's Platform have the mandate to directly challenge traditional gender roles as they are defined in Israel's Palestinian Arab society. However, the experience with women's activism under the umbrella of *Sawt el-Amel* in the past year shows that many women, though observant of their traditional roles within the private sphere of the family, have great motivation and potential to be informal (i.e. not elected to a public office) community leaders. Therefore, the development of leadership skills is the next logical step for further empowerment of the Women's Platform.

### **Economic Self-Sufficiency**

Tens of women have expressed their commitment to become actively involved in building an income-generating project within *Sawt el-Amel*, as a response to the Wisconsin Plan's inability to provide sustainable employment. As a first step, the Women's Platform organised a field trip to income-generating projects for Bedouin women in the Naqab (Negev). *Sawt el-Amel* is very interested in the further development of such activities; however, as it is a completely new field of work, extensive consulting has to precede the establishment of an economic project.

### **Legal Action**

Community activism is not enough to challenge the Wisconsin Plan. In far more than a thousand cases, the Wisconsin administration or employees have not only treated the participants disrespectfully but have actually acted against the law. Therefore, community activism has to be supported by *Sawt el-Amel's* legal clinic, which has the capacity to take cases to court if necessary. The importance of connecting activism and legal work became clear when 15 women protesting in front of the Wisconsin centre had their income benefits cut as a punishment for their "defiance". *Sawt el-Amel* immediately appealed on behalf of the affected women, and their benefits were returned. It is of utmost importance that emerging activists from a disadvantaged social background feel protected and legally "on the safe side" as they have a lot to lose.

### **International Advocacy**

The Women's Platform wants the reasons and results of its struggle to be publicised to the largest possible audience. *Sawt el-Amel* believes that international cooperation and advocacy are extremely important tools, also for grassroots organisations. There is a lot of space for mutual learning and exchange of experiences. Moreover, there is an uncounted number of potential allies in all parts of the world. Therefore, we would like to make the outcomes of this project accessible to an international audience and will be glad to cooperate with Oxfam GB in order to share the results with whoever may benefit from or contribute to this needs assessment.

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<sup>i</sup> One year later, the number has risen to app. 18,000. The Nazareth pilot area has about 6,000 participants.

<sup>ii</sup> The question was posed as follows:

**2. What is, in your opinion, the biggest problem related to the Wisconsin Plan?**

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| a) The lack of solutions for the children   | 4 (8%)   |
| b) The service in the centres is inadequate for my needs                              | 8 (16%)  |
| c) Condescending behaviour of the Wisconsin officials                                 | 6 (12%)  |
| d) The fact that I am forced to attend the centres even if they cannot offer anything | 9 (18%)  |
| e) The Wisconsin Plan does not allow me to fulfil my tasks within the family          | 5 (10%)  |
| f) All of the above together  | 17 (34%) |