



The Employment of Arab Women In the Israeli Economy

Background, Obstacles and Solutions

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Background

Arab women – a social perspective

Arab women are a unique population group living in the cultural shadow of Arab society, which defines their first and foremost role as the traditional wife and mother in charge of raising the children and satisfying the family's needs. Consequently, paid employment outside the home is a low priority for these women. The status of Arab women in Israel has been adversely affected in two respects: They suffer double discrimination; as woman in a traditional Arab society, and as part of the Arab national minority which suffers from neglect and discrimination.

The multiple roles of Arab women

One cannot separate between the many aspects of a woman; a person, an employee, a service consumer, a social activist, a mother, a daughter, a wife and a housewife. These women's lives are characterized by a high degree of mutual dependence, and the central role that these relationships play in their lives must be taken into account.

Developments in Arab women's participation in the labor market

Arab women have always been employed. Before the establishment of the State, they (mainly rural women) worked in agriculture as unpaid laborers in addition to their work in the household. With the extensive expropriation of lands, women remained at home for fear of undesirable encounters with strange men outside their family. Gradually these women found jobs in areas in which segregation is maintained between the genders, and where they remained supervised, such as in textile factories, and more recently, in white collar industries, education, nursing and clerical settings. On the one hand, the percentage of Arab women who work outside the home increased due to a number of factors: (a) The transition from working in a household with an agricultural structure to working as a salaried employee in the general economy; (b) The demand for new sources of income due to the change in the structure of the family and the rise in educational attainment. Over the past three decades the percentage of employed Arab women rose from around 6% to today's current figure of around 18%. Nevertheless, no more than a small percentage of women work outside the home as salaried employees. On the other hand, the Arab economy is still dependent on the Jewish economy, mainly because the modernization process was not accompanied by corresponding internal economic development of the Arab economy, *inter alia* due to a lack of independent Arab funding and government investments.

There is a slow upward trend in the percentage of Arab women who participate in the workforce, coupled with an ever-increasing desire to do so. One of the important factors in this process is the economic factor, but it is not the sole cause. Another factor of major importance is the women's desire for self-fulfillment and their desire to leave their private space – the home – for the public space – society. These women want to be in the company of people and make a contribution to society.

The status of female Arab salaried employees

The common perception of employed women is that of secondary breadwinners, with men as the heads of the household and the actual or potential primary breadwinners. It is evident from this perception that society expects men to provide the family's salary, while women are first and foremost mothers. As secondary breadwinners, they don't have to be paid in full for their work. We are witness to a grave phenomenon of a decline in the prestige of an occupation or job when they are held by women, and this is manifested in an accompanying drop in salary.

The employment professions

It was found that Arab women are employed in professions that are defined as "feminine" in two areas: white collar professions – education, nursing and healthcare, and blue collar professions – services, and as unskilled labor such as cleaning, textiles and packing. While the Arab women who are employed in Israel are to be found in virtually all spheres of employment – medicine, law, journalism, acting, art, literature and other fields, there are actually very few of them, often with only a single representative in each field.

The terms of employment

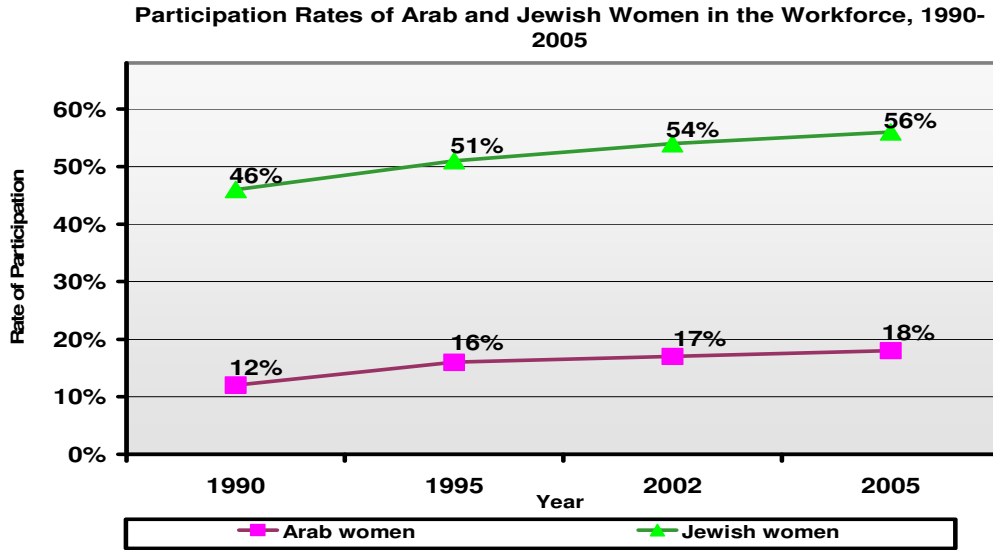
Many Arab women who work outside the home suffer from harsh working conditions and are employed with no social benefits: No annual vacation, sick leave, payment for overtime, occupational security or the possibility of promotion. They are employed primarily in textile factories, in the food industry and as cleaners, including maids in private homes.

Arab women: Numerical data

- **General data:** In 2005 there were 401,000 Arab women living in Israel aged over 15, i.e. the age of entry into the workforce; 78% of this group were Moslem, 12.5% Christian and 9.5% Druze. The main districts where they live are the northern, southern and central districts (i.e. outside the major cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa).¹
- **The development of participation rates in the workforce:** The percentage of Arab women in the workplace has been on the rise over the past 15 years, but it remains significantly lower than that of other population groups. The gap between Arab women and Jewish women has remained stable over the years.²

¹ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Table No. 8.1

² Orly Lotan, compilation of data on the subject of: The Employment of Women in the Arab Sector (the Knesset, Research and Information Center, January 22, 2007).



- **Participation rate in the workforce:** In 2005 the percentage of Arab women in the workforce was just 18%, significantly lower than the figure for Arab men (58.9%) and Jewish women (56.0%).³
- **Percentage of unemployed women:** Most of the Arab women included in the workforce are employed (85%), but the percentage of employed Arab women of the entire population of working-age women is a mere 15%. **This implies that 85% of all Arab women of working age are unemployed.**⁴

	Arab men	Arab women	Jewish women
Employment rate out of total work force	89.9%	84.4%	83.0%
Employment rate out of total working age population *	53.0%	15.1%	46.0%
Unemployment rate out of total working age population *	47.0%	84.9%	54.0%

1. The workforce: individuals aged 15 and above who are employed or who actively sought employment during the four weeks preceding the survey

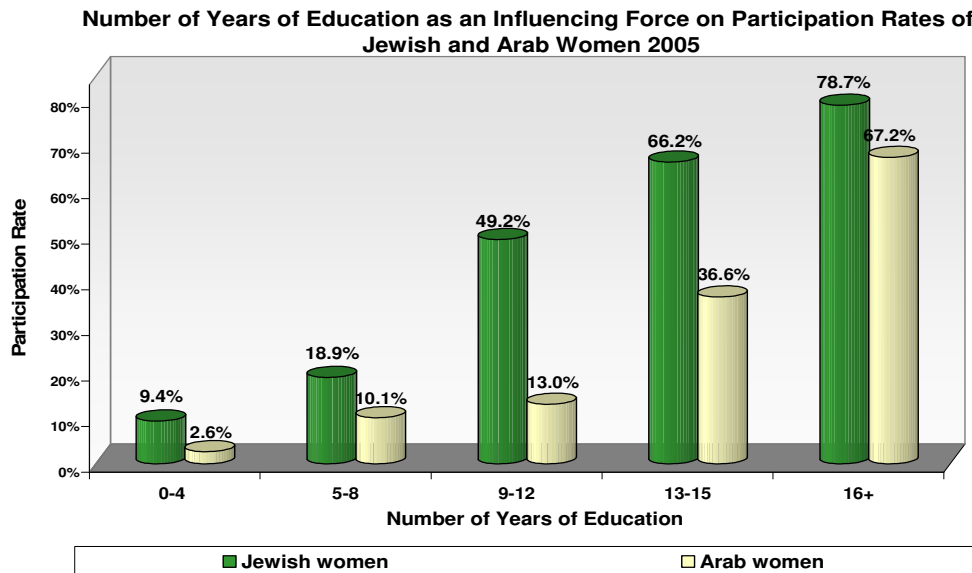
2. Working age population: individuals aged 15 years and above

- **Relationship between years of education and participation rate:** The rate of participation in the workforce rises with the number of years of schooling (for example, the rate of participation of women with 9 – 12 years of schooling is 13%, the rate of participation of women with 13 – 15 years of

³ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Tables No. 1.2 and 8.2

⁴ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Tables No. 1.10 and 8.2

schooling is 36.6% and that of women with 16 or more years of schooling is 67.2%).⁵



The comparison between Arab women and Jewish woman indicates that the gap between participation rates decreases as the number of years of post-secondary education increases. In other words: educational attainment could reduce the gaps between Jewish and Arab women.

The largest gap in workforce participation rates was found in the group of women with 9 – 12 years of schooling, while the smallest gap was found in the group with 16 and more years of schooling.

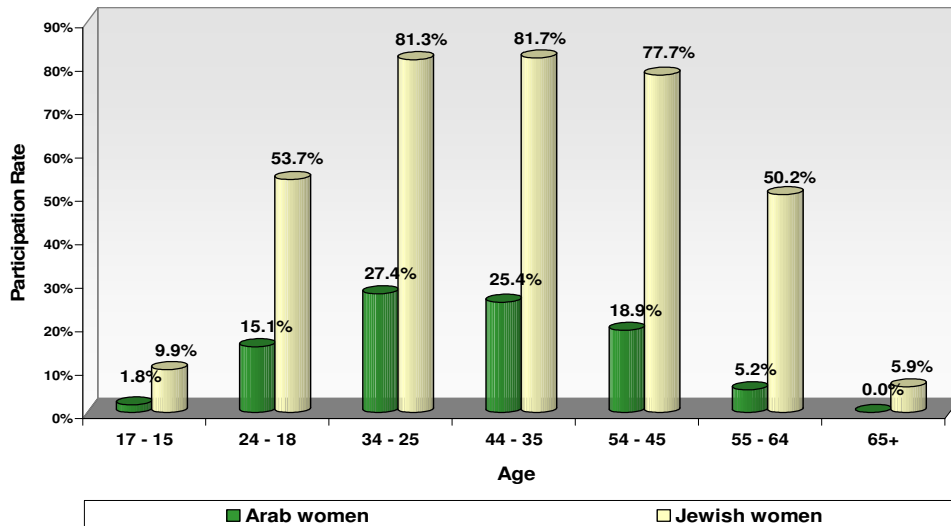
- Relationship between age and workforce participation rates:** Among Arab women, the highest participation rate is that of women aged 25 – 44 (the participation rate among ages 25 – 34 is 27.4%, and for ages 35 – 44 the rate is 25.4%). However, these rates are fairly low in comparison with the participation rates of Jewish woman in the corresponding age group – over 80%.

The participation rate of mature Arab women (55 – 64) is negligible in comparison with Jewish women of the same age group (5% and 50%, respectively).⁶

⁵ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Tables No. 1.10 and 8.2

⁶ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Tables No. 1.4 and 8.2

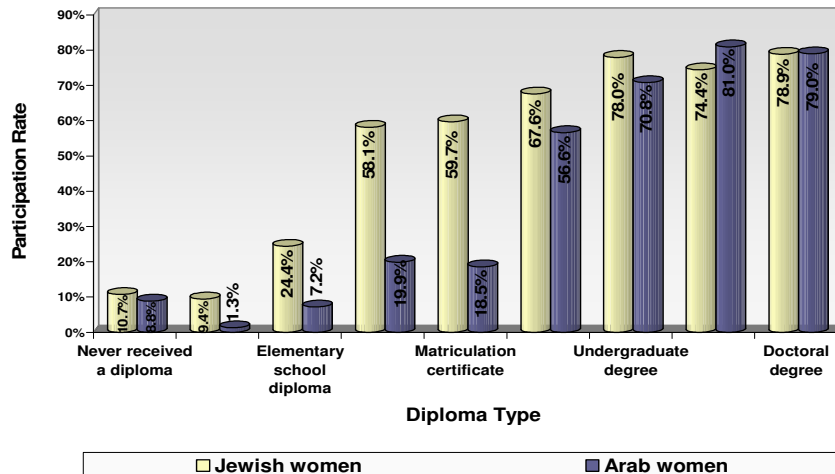
Participation Rate of Jewish and Arab Women According to Age



- The relationship between diploma type and workforce participation rate:** The higher the level of education indicated by the woman's diploma, the higher the workforce participation rate. For example, the participation rate of female high school graduates, women with undergraduate degrees, and women with graduate degrees is 18.5%, 70.8% and 81.0%, respectively.⁷

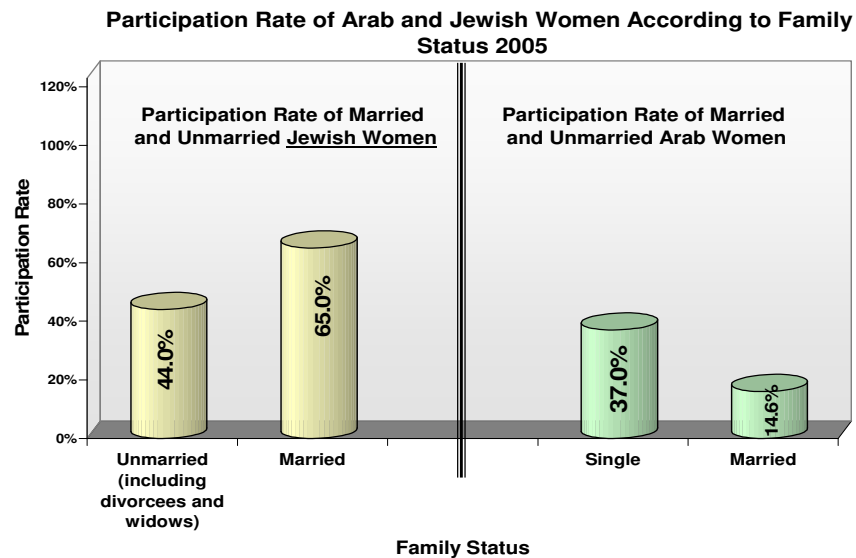
The higher the level of education indicated by the woman's diploma, the narrower the gap between participation rates of Arab women and Jewish women.

Participation Rates of Jewish and Arab Women According to Diploma Type 2005



⁷ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Tables No. 1.8 and 8.2

- **Workforce participation rate and religion:** Moslem women head unemployed women grouped by religion (87.8%), followed by Druze women (85.4%) and finally Christian women (68.3%).⁸
- **Workforce participation rate and marital status:** The participation rate of married Arab women is lower than that of single women, 14.6% and 37.0%, respectively. On the other hand, the situation among Jewish women is the reverse: participation of unmarried women, including divorcees and widows, is lower than that of married women (44.0% and 65.0%, respectively). These figures underline the impact of the women's cultural background on their behavior and preferences throughout their lifetime.⁹



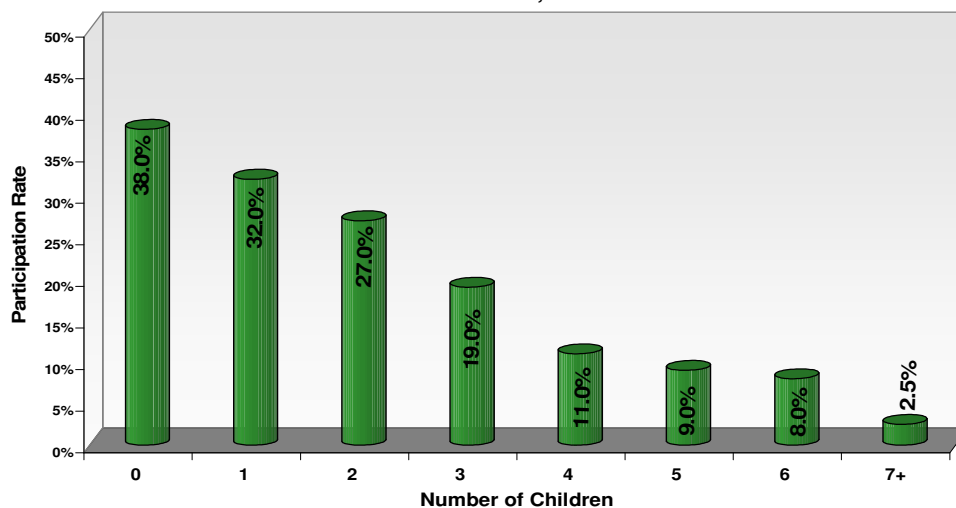
- **Number of children and workforce participation rate:** There is an inverse relationship between number of children and workforce participation rate among Arab women. The more children a woman has, the lower her chances of entering the labor market. For example, the rate of participation of Arab women with one child is 32.0%, that of a mother of four children is 11.0% and that of a mother of four children is 2.5%.¹⁰

⁸ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Table No. 8.1

⁹ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Table No. 1.33

¹⁰ Orly Lotan, compilation of data on the subject of: The Employment of Women in the Arab Sector (the Knesset, Research and Information Center, January 22, 2007).

Participation Rate of Arab and Jewish Women According to Number of Children, 2005



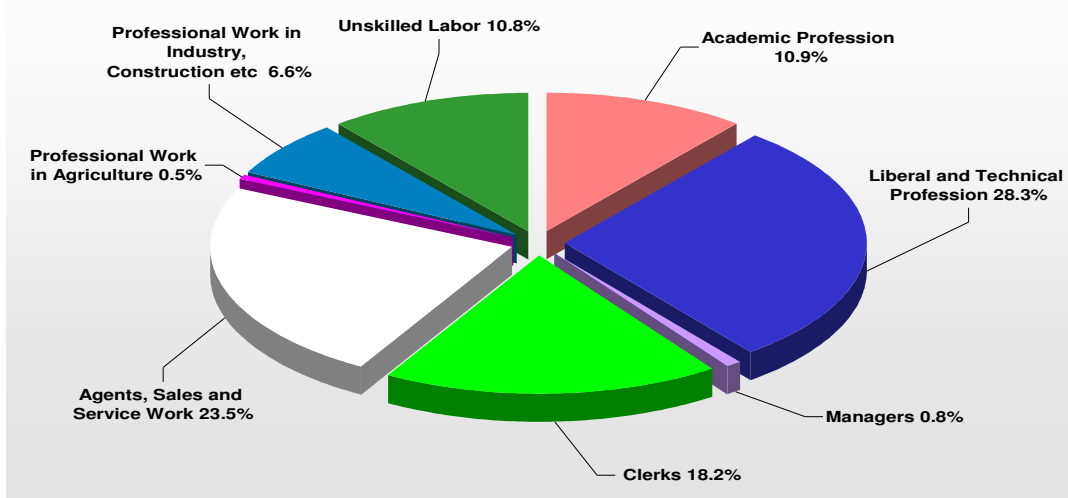
- **A driver's license as a factor affecting the rate of participation in the workforce:** The rate of participation in the workforce of Arab women who have a driver's license is higher than that of women who do not who have a driver's license (49% versus 9% respectively). These figures add to the grim state of public transportation that is rampant in Arab towns, as a result of which possession of a driver's license and a car have become key conditions for holding any job located at any distance from the place of residence.¹¹
- **Employment rates for part-time employment:** Over 50% of all Arab women hold part-time jobs, compared with 41% of all Jewish women and a mere 15% of all Arab men.¹²
- **Professions of Arab women:** The main professions of employed Arab women are agents, sales and service personnel (23.5%); white collar and technical professionals (28.3%), and; secretaries (18.2%). On the other hand, their representation in managerial positions is very low (0.8%).¹³

¹¹ Orly Lotan, compilation of data on the subject of: The Employment of Women in the Arab Sector (the Knesset, Research and Information Center, January 22, 2007).

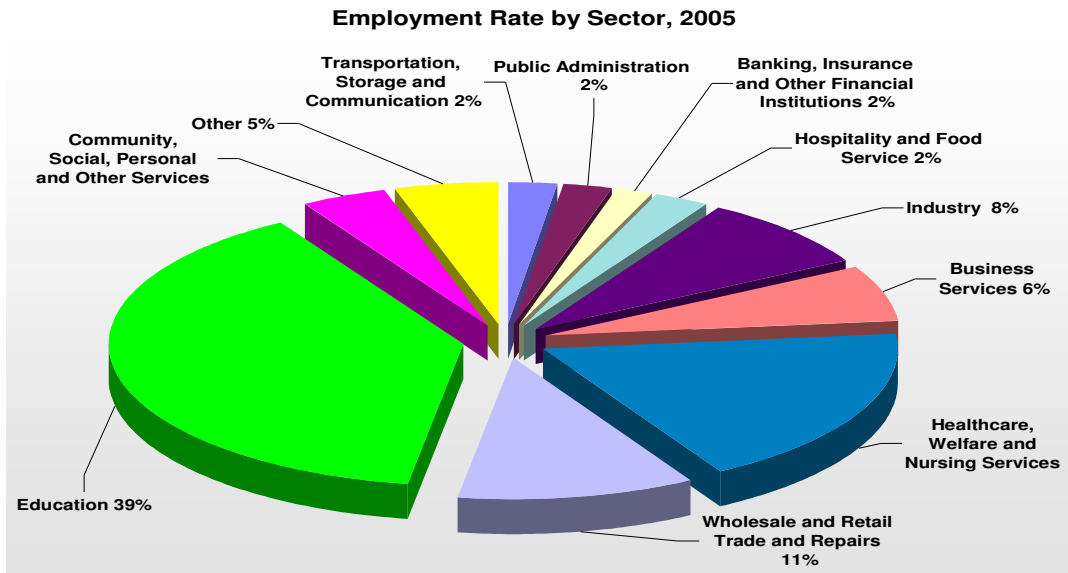
¹² The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Table No. 8.1

¹³ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Table No. 8.3

Employment of Arab Women According to Profession, 2005



- Employment sectors of Arab women:** The sectors in which most Arab women are employed are education (39%), healthcare, welfare and nursing services (18%), and commerce (11%). In contrast, the employment of Arab women in banking and public administration (2% in each sector) is very low and is far from the situation among the Jewish population.¹⁴



¹⁴ The Central Bureau of Statistics, manpower survey, 2005, www.cbs.gov.il, Table No. 8.3

- **Income of Arab women:** Most Arab women are in the low salary categories: 24% of the Arab women earn up to NIS 2,000, and 19% earn between NIS 2,001 and NIS 3,000. At the other end of the scale very few Arab women are found at the high salary levels: 2% of the Arab women earn between NIS 10,001 and NIS 14,000. None earn over NIS 14,000.¹⁵

Salary Distribution Arab Women, Jewish Women, Arab Men			
	Arab women	Jewish women	Arab men
Up to 2,000	24%	15%	7%
3,000-2,001	19%	12%	9%
3,500-3,001	9%	8%	10%
4,000-3,501	10%	8%	13%
5,000-4,001	6%	13%	17%
6,000-5,001	12%	9%	11%
7,500-6,001	9%	8%	8%
10,000-7,501	4%	8%	6%
14,000-10,001	2%	5%	3%
Above 14,000	0%	4%	1%
Unknown	5%	10%	15%

Obstacles to the integration of Arab women in the workforce

Below we review several factors that have been identified as obstacles to the entry of Arab women into the Israeli workforce.

Internal barriers:

- **The socio-cultural codes of Arab society:** Arab women's occupational and economic conduct is subject to all the social and cultural norms of Arab society. These norms are rooted in the traditional nature of this society, which perceives woman as a symbol of the national honor and culture, and which does everything in its power to protect this symbol. In order to ensure adequate protection of the symbol, a woman is forced to remain within the confines of her town, which minimizes her employment options, and she must content herself with a limited number of jobs that are typically of inferior status and unskilled nature.

Moreover, Arab women are in charge of caring for the home and children and their partners (the man) are designated as the family's main breadwinner. Therefore if her care of her home suffers (or may suffer) due to her employment outside the home, an Arab woman is expected to forgo employment outside the home in favor of her responsibilities to her home and children.

¹⁵ Orly Lotan, compilation of data on the subject of: The Employment of Women in the Arab Sector (the Knesset, Research and Information Center, January 22, 2007).

- **Education:** Arab women's level of education is considered an accurate predictor of their chances of joining the labor market. A significant percentage of Arab women have not acquired higher education, and thus they have a limited choice of "feminine" jobs at their disposal. In recent years evidence points to a rise in the attainment of higher education among Arab women of the new generations, who realize that higher education is a requirement when competing for the small number of jobs that are now available in the environs of Arab towns.

External barriers:

- **An inferior economy:** Israel's Arab towns are overshadowed by an under-developed economy resulting from many years of neglect on the part of the state, which prevents the creation of the climate necessary for the development of employment opportunities for Arab women. Moreover, the "Jewish economy" does not perceive Arab towns as a potential target for investment, due to obstacles that are mainly psychological and not necessarily economic, such as perceived inferior quality of workmanship ("Arab work" is the Hebrew slang term for shoddy workmanship), investing in the enemy, etc.
- **Limited selection of jobs:** The limited number of occupations open to Arab women creates excess supply in these professions, which leads to a drop in the salaries of the employed Arab women. Moreover, employers take advantage of the cultural constraints of women in Arab society and offer them part-time jobs that are compatible with their traditional roles.
- **Low salary:** The poor earning potential inherent in the "feminine" jobs offered in Arab towns reduces the motivation of woman, and married women in particular, to enter into what they perceive as "loss" transactions that are not worthwhile. Additionally, most Arab women hold part-time jobs, which might explain their low monthly income.
- **Lack of adequate access to public transportation:** Israel's Arab towns suffer from poor access to major cities and nearby employment centers, which impedes women's entry into the labor market. At the same time, the multiple roles of employed mothers make convenient means of transportation a primary and necessary condition for employment outside the home. Therefore, many women restrict their job search to areas near their place of residence in advance, which significantly limits their options and the opportunities available to them in the labor market.
- **Shortage of childcare facilities:** In Arab society, caring for children is a woman's tradition role, and if she wishes to work outside the home, a mother must find alternative childcare arrangements for her children. Today, however, there is a severe lack of daycare centers, which prevents many women from joining the labor market.

- **Limited enforcement of labor laws:** Arab women are reluctant to enter the “local” employment market due to employers who refuse to grant the women their basic rights and who shamelessly exploit them.

What is the solution?

When examining how to change the status quo and drive a process of integrating Arab women in the labor market, we must make the following assumptions:

- The Israeli economy and society as a whole loses the most from the status quo. Failure to resolve this situation will increase the divide between Jews and Arabs and will become an added burden on the economy, and will require far greater investment in the future.
- We cannot wait for “natural” changes driven by market forces. People and organizations with a stake in this transformation must take intensive action to bring about the necessary change.
- Solutions proposed to date were inappropriate for the target population, its characteristics, or its particular obstacles to employment.
- Comprehensive action by all sectors is necessary to cope with the multiple barriers simultaneously. A campaign to raise awareness among the leadership and among the potential female workforce must be a part of these efforts. .
- Previous attempts that failed to bring about the desired change generated a sense of disappointment among the women, a sense of despair even, regarding the potential success of new plans. These feelings are liable to undermine other admirable attempts by willing supporters and advocates.
- The challenge of integration must be addressed in a comprehensive and integrated fashion. The various stakeholders must coordinate their intervention strategies, focus resources and join forces. This course of action will prevent waste and enable proper monitoring of developments in the field.

An understanding of this reality leads us to several possible steps that should be taken in order to bring about the desired change in the employment of Arab women:

- Social agencies must intensify their professional and reliable work in the field to achieve localized successes that will constitute an example for the policymakers. It is clear that at a more advanced stage these agencies will be able to position themselves at the center of a triangle connecting the three important points in the change process: the government, the Arab women population, and the potential employers.
- The government must exhibit responsibility and an understanding of the employment problems of the female population. First, the situation in the

field must be studied systematically, and the necessary resources for removing and resolving the obstacles must be allocated.

- Employers must take part in the integration efforts. No breakthrough is possible without their willingness and understanding of the challenge. However, their active participation must be based on business logic and the understanding that the absorption of the Arab woman in the workplace offers them an inherent benefit as well.

The Abraham Fund Initiatives

The Abraham Fund Initiatives is a non-governmental organization that strives to advance equality and partnership between the Jewish and Arab citizens of the State of Israel, in order to promote a thriving, stable, safe and just society.

The Fund has three main spheres of activity:

- **Tolerance and coexistence education**
- **Promoting equal opportunities for Israel's Arab citizens**
- **Developing Jewish-Arab leadership in support of coexistence**

The Abraham Fund promotes its vision through the development and operation of large-scale initiatives whose goals are to demonstrate that it is possible to establish true partnership and equality, and to promote policy making that focuses on these values.

The organization is currently operating six nationwide initiatives:

- The **Women at Work** Initiative for the economic empowerment and improvement of Arab women in the Galilee through their integration in the workforce (The Abraham Fund Initiatives placed this issue on its agenda, and allocated time and resources for its support).
- The **Language as a Cultural Bridge** Initiative promoting instruction of conversational Arabic in the Jewish educational system.
- The **Mirkam in the Galilee** Initiative, which constitutes a model for coexistence, equality and interactions between communities and local authorities in the Galilee.
- The **Police-Community** Initiative, which is designed to establish trust and promote rapprochement between the Arab public and Israel Police, and to enable fair and respectful policing for Israel's Arab citizens.
- The **Government Training** Initiative, which is engaged in advocacy and exposing Israel's decision-makers to the Arab community, its needs and its challenges.
- The **Jewish-Arab Coexistence Network**, whose goal is to empower non-profit associations and grass-roots organizations working to promote coexistence and equality to formulate a broad community that supports these issues.