

The International Corner

Work and Family in Israel

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Israel was founded in 1948 as a Jewish state and is now a parliamentary democracy. Israel's population numbers 7.1 million: of these, 75.8% are Jews, 19.9% are Arabs (mostly Muslim), and the remaining 4.3% comprise Druze, Circassians, and those with no religious affiliation.

Forty-eight percent of women in Israel are employed (of these, 64% are Jewish and 23% are Arab). Half of the women are employed in traditional jobs such as teaching, secretarial work, and caregiving. As for managerial positions, only 10% of Israel's chief executive officers are women, and 32% of senior managers are women. Men earn a monthly wage about 37% higher than that of women.

According to a survey conducted in 2007, each week, husbands in double-income households spend 49 hours at work, 21 hours on child care, 8 hours on care for the elderly, and 7 hours on housekeeping. In comparison, wives each week spend 43 hours at work, 33 hours on child care, 7 hours on care for the elderly, and 16 hours on housekeeping. Moreover, in response to the demands of today's workplace, 20.4% of Israeli employees engage in work duties at home after work hours. Of these, 55% are women. Parents, mostly mothers, represent the majority of those who take work home (63%). On average, women spend 10 hours a week working from home.

Despite the relatively high percentage of women in the workforce, most women still seem to maintain their traditional roles as mothers, wives, and housekeepers along with the additional demands of paid employment. Moreover, women still experience discrimination in various aspects of work.

Government Programs Promote Women's Status in the Workforce

As a result, the Israeli government has been investigating resources to promote women's status in workforce-

related matters. For example, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, established within Israel's Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor in 2006, recently filed its first complaint. Government resolution 1134 is entitled "Steps for Reducing Social Gaps and Increasing Participation in the Labor Force." This resolution added NIS 67 million to the budget yearly from 2008 through 2010 to be allocated to daycare services for children up to age 3 and the provision of lunches for children younger than age 6. The additional funding is earmarked for three purposes: lowering the cost of childcare through increased subsidy payments, subsidizing afternoon childcare facilities (previously not eligible for funding by the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Labor), and improving service by elongating daycare operating hours according to parental needs. An additional NIS 50 million has been allocated toward the construction of new daycare centers.

Another improvement in promoting women's status in the workforce relates to strengthening pregnancy and maternity protection for working women. The most noteworthy change is extending maternity leave from 12 to 14 weeks.

In addition, Government resolution 1362, passed in 2007, requires government ministers to appoint women to directorial positions in government corporations until equal representation of men and women is achieved.

Despite Best Efforts, Problems Remain

On the surface, the government's many new policies intended to foster a work-family balance seem adequate. But in fact, many problems remain. There are serious discrepancies between government policies and the reality of what workers encounter in the workplace. This is especially true in the wake of the 2009 economic crisis, in which businesses have been forced to make drastic cuts in employee benefits in a bid to survive. It seems that more efforts should be directed toward the enforcement of policies and laws laid down by the government. However, to develop a more equal society, passing and enforcing laws, though crucial, is not enough. Society must assimilate norms of equity. Intervention programs are vital for the education of individuals and organizations alike in an effort to alter the informal norms of traditional gender-role segregation.

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