

Background

Combating Violence Against Women

הקן החדשה לישראל
New Israel Fund
الصندوق الجديد لإسرائيل



Towards Equality and Justice

At all stages of history, women have made significant contributions to Israel's political, economic, and social development. Yet social institutions, patriarchal traditions, and religious laws have kept women at a disadvantage in schools, the workplace, the courthouse, and as victims of violence.

Israeli women in minority and immigrant groups have disproportionately high rates of unemployment, poverty, health problems and abuse of basic rights. The Orthodox religious monopoly over marriage, divorce and other issues of personal status impinges on the rights of Jewish women to marry whomever they choose or obtain a divorce without their husband's consent. Their Arab and Bedouin neighbors often have it worse, with polygamy, domestic abuse and even honor killings staining the community. Most vulnerable of all, however, are the growing number of women, almost all from the former Soviet Union, trafficked for prostitution.

- Statistics show that **1 in 3 Israeli women will be sexually assaulted** at least once in her lifetime.
- Women in minority and immigrant groups have disproportionately **high rates of unemployment, poverty, health problems and abuse of basic rights.**
- Women make up close to 50% of the workforce in Israel, yet are **paid an average of only 62% of men's salaries** and constitute 70% of those earning minimum wage or less.
- The Orthodox religious monopoly over marriage, divorce and other personal status issues **prevents women from marrying whomever they choose or from obtaining a divorce without their husband's consent.**
- In 2006 only 15% of representatives on local councils and **only 17% of Knesset members were women.**

Several high profile cases of sexual assault came to light in 2006 among Israel's highest political echelons, forcing Israeli society to face these issues in the public arena. The numbers of reported physical, emotional and sexual assaults continue to rise every year across all sectors of society. Victims from traditional sectors (ultra-orthodox, recent immigrant, and Arab) lack sufficient services and are often shunned by their communities. There is a need to combat not only extreme phenomena such as murder and "honor killings" but also to change the societal norms that accept aggressive behavior and gender inequality in general.

Challenges

- A recent study by the Israel Women's Network finds that the Israeli justice system requires less evidence to convict a woman, that judges challenge female witnesses' credibility far more often, and that men who attack females with whom they are related or romantically involved are treated more leniently than those who attack strangers.
- According to Israeli law, marriage status falls under the jurisdiction of *Halacha* (Jewish law), as interpreted by the Orthodox rabbinate. In divorce proceedings a woman is therefore dependent upon her husband's consent and is very often a victim of extortion.
- Among ultra-Orthodox, Arab, Bedouin, and immigrant populations women must overcome deeply-ingrained prejudices and customs. Though families in these communities frequently live below the poverty line, traditional family structure and gender discrimination prevent women from earning enough to break their families out of the cycle of poverty.

Ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) Women

- The *Haredi* community suffers from the greatest occurrence of sexual abuse against women and minors
- Abused *Haredi* women rarely come forward, intimidated by the pervasive culture of silence around sexual issues and fearful for being blamed themselves.

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- Estimates indicate that 50% of married Arab women are beaten at least once a year; 25% are beaten at least once every six months. Very few women come forward to report this violence.
- Honor killings are still a regular occurrence. Arab Israeli women have been murdered by family members for dishonoring the family, sometimes for as little as speaking to a man. These crimes often go unreported, witnesses refuse to testify, and there is question as to whether the police pursue these cases adequately.

Bedouin Women

- Official statistics for 2005 indicate that only 11% of Bedouin women are part of the labor market, compared to 61% percent of Jewish women who live in the Negev. The average wage for Bedouin women is 28.5% lower than the average for women in Israel.

Trafficked Women

- According to police estimates, as many as several thousand women are trafficked into Israel every year to work in the sex industry. They are victims of violence, threats, and rape by smugglers, pimps and clients.
- Trafficking victims rarely speak Hebrew and are clueless about how to navigate the legal system. They are often trapped in a trafficking cycle, deported to their home country only to be trafficked back into Israel once again.

NIF Activities and Achievements

NIF aims to reduce violence against women in Israel by working to:

- Raise public awareness of the problem;
- Empower women from disadvantaged and traditional sectors, and strengthen organizations working to advance women's status in these communities;
- Win better safeguards, funding and support for victims of sexual violence
- Promote solutions for thousands of women denied a *get* (divorce);
- Combat trafficking of women.

Our grantees and projects include:

- **Association of Rape Crisis Centers (ARCCI)**, an umbrella organization that works to reduce sexual violence and improve services for victims of sexual assault. Strategies include advocacy, PR campaigns such as a hike across the country led by rape victims, and developing new models of professional service for different communities.
- **Kolech (Religious Women's Forum)** works to improve the status of women through a consensual process of change from within the Orthodox community. Kolech addresses domestic violence, sexual harassment by rabbis, and conspiracies of silence in the community. Kolech also develops gender equality curricula, and in 2006 its program was instituted by the Ministry of Education in several religious high schools for both girls and boys.
- **International Coalition for Agunah Rights (ICAR)** is a coalition of 25 organizations that advocates solutions for *agunot* (chained women). In 2006, ICAR gained major media coverage for *agunot* by holding an NIF-supported conference with over 1000 participants.
- **Center for Women's Justice (CWJ)** was established by lawyers specializing in personal status law and Orthodox women trained to serve as "rabbinic court pleaders." CWJ achieved a precedent-setting civil court ruling imposing a \$100,000 fine on a man who refused to grant his wife a *get* despite an order by the rabbinic court. CWJ is now working to expand this legal precedent.

- **SHATIL Ethiopian Women's Coalition against Domestic Violence** – Over 25% of Israeli women killed by their husbands in the past decade have been Ethiopian Israelis, although Ethiopians comprise only 1% of the population. In response, SHATIL has united 11 organizations in a campaign that involves both men and women in developing holistic, culturally-sensitive solutions, and in placing the issue on the community's agenda.
- **Women Against Violence (WAV)** works to eliminate physical and psychological violence against women in the Arab sector, promoting their integration in the workforce and in leadership positions. WAV operates a hotline, a battered women's shelter, a rape crisis center and a halfway house for girls. WAV also works in the legal arena, and in 2006 accompanied 52 women through court proceedings.
- **SHATIL's Bedouin Women's Empowerment Program** runs empowerment and leadership courses that train women to facilitate workshops in their villages on issues such as sex education and family planning, child marriage, polygamy, and domestic violence.
- **Ma'an** is a forum that unites 12 Bedouin women's organizations to raise awareness of violence against women in Bedouin society and promote culturally-appropriate solutions. Ma'an is launching a pilot dialogue series that seeks to involve men in the process of women's empowerment and in envisioning the future character of Bedouin society.
- **SHATIL's Coalition against Trafficking in Women** unites women's, labor and human rights organizations around the issue of human trafficking. In 2006, the Knesset passed comprehensive legislation that outlaws trafficking, imposes prison sentences up to 20 years on those found guilty of trafficking, and provides compensation for victims from fines imposed by the courts. The SHATIL Coalition also launched a television media campaign appealing to clients of trafficked prostitutes, emphasizing that the truth of their abuse is not at all "stimulating."
- **Hotline for Migrant Workers, Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), Isha L'Isha (Woman to Woman) and Workers' Hotline** are all NIF grantees that contributed to the development of the new anti-trafficking legislation. Several of these organizations also provide vital humanitarian and legal aide to trafficked women, including translators and arrangements with NGOs in their home country to ensure their safety from repeat-trafficking after leaving Israel.

NIF Connections

Kolech and Women Against Violence

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An Unorthodox Revolution

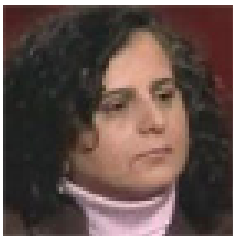


With the support of New Israel Fund, Chana Kehat founded *Kolech: The Religious Women's Forum*, in 1998 to promote women's rights through a consensual process of change from *within* Orthodoxy. The organization now has 9 vibrant branches throughout Israel, actively fighting on behalf of "chained" and abused women, addressing the taboo subject of sexual harassment in the Orthodox community, speaking out against the Rabbinate on issues of women's rights, and promoting increased religious roles for women within Orthodoxy.

Kolech's strategies include public education in the religious community; conferences, seminars and parlor meetings; activities in the religious education system; empowerment and leadership training; publications; and advocacy aimed at religious leaders. Kolech's annual International Conference on Women and Jewishness drew 2,000 people last year and focused on the need to establish alternative rabbinic courts.

Kolech began a mentoring program for 15 Orthodox women to develop projects to advance the status of women in their communities. Projects include circulating a prenuptial agreement (to protect women against blackmail in case of divorce), empowering Orthodox divorcees, promoting the status of Orthodox women in the media, and setting up a legal aid center. Monthly issues of "Kolech" magazine are distributed to 5,000 synagogues (70,000 copies per year). Kolech has developed a curriculum on gender equality for grades 10-12, which is being taught in 5 schools, and recently helped to establish a new coalition of liberal Orthodox organizations that aims to strengthen liberal Orthodoxy within the increasingly radical and conservative State Religious school system.

Protecting the Unprotected



Also with the support of New Israel Fund, Aida Touma-Suliman founded *Women Against Violence (WAV)* in 1992, a leading Israeli-Arab women's organization based in Nazareth. WAV initially focused exclusively on the problem of violence against women and was the first organization to establish shelters and a rape crisis center for Arab women. Two years ago, WAV expanded its focus to promoting women's involvement in the public and political centers of influence, and promoting employment opportunities for university-educated Arab women.

WAV recently published a position paper that emphasizes the need to develop industrial zones in Arab localities, establish day-care facilities and develop transportation and other infrastructure to facilitate Arab women's employment.

WAV's strategies include public education and advocacy, direct services to victims of abuse, and developing innovative leadership models. Past achievements of this longtime NIF grantee include: several studies to assess attitudes in the Israeli-Arab community towards women's rights and status; designing an innovative project to promote civil equality for Arab women in Israel and their representation in decision-making forums; operating a crisis hotline, a shelter for battered women and their children, and two halfway houses; and accompanying victims of sexual harassment through criminal proceedings in the North of Israel. WAV has also established a coalition of women's and human rights' groups to promote representation of Arab women and their needs.

Questions for Discussion

General Discussion

1. Are Chana and Aida succeeding in making their respective societies safer and more equitable for women? What did you note as their most impressive achievements? What did you note as their most daunting remaining challenges?
2. Do you approve of Aida's method of mediating between abusive husbands, brothers, and fathers and abused women, or should she focus on removing the women from the situation altogether?
3. How do you react to the striking similarity between the status of women in the orthodox Jewish community and women in the Arab community? In what ways are the communities the same, and in what ways do they differ?

Going Deeper

1. From the example of Aida's family---specifically her father---what relationship exists between education and humanistic values? What role does education play in advancing the status of women in traditional societies?
2. What relationship do you think exists between Chana's feminist spirit, her evolving sensitivity to the Palestinian plight, and her opposition to the settlements? What about her character might have brought about this shift in ideology?

Further Resources

New Israel Fund website (Issue Area: Women's Rights): <http://www.nif.org/issue-areas/womens-rights/>

The International Coalition for Agunah Rights (ICAR): <http://www.icar.org.il/en/organizations>

The US State Department Annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report: <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/>

Isha L'Isha: The Haifa Women's Center: <http://www.isha.org.il/default.php?lng=3>

The Hotline for Migrant Workers: www.hotline.org.il