

NCJW – How Israeli Women and Families are Overcoming Challenges During COVID-19
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>> FACILITATOR: First, we will meet Professor Daphna Hacker of Tel Aviv. She is the head of the Women and Gender Studies Program at Tel Aviv University. She researches and teaches.

Next, we have Rabbi Olya Feinstein Weinstein with Project Keshar Israel. She is located in Jerusalem.

Next, we will jump to Michal Avera Samuel at Hod HaSharon, who is advocate for the integration of Ethiopian Israelis at Fidel Association where she has been associate director since 2011.

We will also meet Fida Nara who is the head of Mahapach-Taghir, an advocate for equal opportunities for all.

We will then go back to Jerusalem with Fainy Sukenik. She is a social activist and is the founder of Ba'asher Telchi, which means 'wherever you go. They provide support for Arabian and Orthodox women.

We will finish in Haifa. It is my honor to welcome Professor Daphna Hacker.

>> DAPHNA HACKER: Hello everybody. It is wonderful to be here and thank you for the invitation. It is a great honor to open this event with a truly short lecture. I will help make my point with a PowerPoint presentation.

When we are talking about COVID-19, which we call corona in Israel, we talk about the direct damage it causes. We're facing the death of 351 people in Israel. But when comparing the situation in Israel to that in the US, it's 309 times higher than Israel. The population in the US is only 36 times bigger. We are doing better although as mentioned, we are facing a second wave. To compare with Australia, they are doing much better than Israel. They only have a third of the death with three times the population.

The average age of those who have died of COVID-19 in Israel is 81. About half are women. A bit less than that. We expect that the direct damage of COVID-19 would hit women more severely than men because the average age of women is older. In Israel, they live for years longer than men. Actually, it's the other way around. In other countries, we see the same pattern in more radical ways when men die at higher risks than women.

Some of the causes are biological. Women have stronger immune systems however some causes are also behavioral. Women smoke less and are more careful with the guidelines to prevent infection. What we call toxic masculinity is evident here. When men are not careful enough about their health, they are hit harder by the direct risks of COVID-19.

We have learned from this disaster that we do not have to only add those that are hit directly by the virus. Because of the closure of the economy, it is the price that we all pay. Here you can see additional harm that we've learned from the Statistical Bureau in Israel. You can see a high percentage of deterioration in emotional well-being, stress, anxiety, loneliness. What is alarming in the statistics is not only are they so high, but we do not have any idea how many men and women we see here. The government does not bother to collect data through gender.

Domestic violence is something we quickly realize is on the rise in this epidemic. There have been more complaints to the police and NGO reporting from the field that the phone keeps ringing. It became evident even more dramatically after the closure ended of the first wave. Even a bigger number of calls were reaching the hotlines. We see different countries responding differently. In Italy, there are increasing complaints because the women mistrust the police and the state.

>> FACILITATOR: We don't see your PowerPoints. I'm sorry. We don't see your PowerPoints.

>> DAPHNA HACKER: I'm sorry. Okay. In Israel, we learned that the government thinks of visiting women who might be victims of domestic violence. This is a dangerous idea. This extended the state-funded to assistance to battered women, which was especially important.

The feminist field reacted very quickly amazingly starting March 24. It led to the government calling for assistance with all kinds of measures that need to be taken. The establishment of the feminist emergency headquarters that is blessed by NCJW.

There's a platform here for the first time that gathered feminist platforms and activists and domestic violence was the top priority. We have managed to create a shift in public discourse focusing on the batterers and not only the victims and how we remove them from the homes and not the women.

On June 1, we had a huge demonstration. Another amazing thing is for the first time, we saw a critical mass of men participating in the demonstration. These are things that we have not seen before. We are already starting to see the impact in mid-June. The government approved a bill for ankle monitoring to prevent murder and domestic violence. We have been fighting for this bill for several years. This is the first time the government has taken this proposal and promises to pass it in parliament.

On June 22, the Minister of Welfare comes to allocate the promised budget that was lost in all the election commotion. He promised to put it in the field and on the ground, assisting women and treating the batterers.

Another issue we are concerned about is employment. We have a high rate of unemployment. Currently 18% before the second wave has caused additional harm to the economy. We know women are already marginalized

within the Israeli labor market. Several examples. You see here that we are among the countries with the highest gender pay gap. Israeli women earned 68% compared to men. We have high rates of glass ceilings and part-time and women taking a much larger share in the labor done at home. They pay the price for that in the labor market. Things that emerge within this crisis. Thousands of requests to fire women. The government says is okay to fire them during the crisis. There was a petition in the Supreme Court to prevent it. The government then withdrew. The government did not allow single mothers to receive unemployment allowance, if they got child-support supplements from the state. Again, NGO action has causes to be withdrawn.

In academia, we see male researchers are publishing more papers now than before the disaster, while female researchers are publishing lists. Lastly, a glance of new studies that emerged from the COVID-19 crisis.

Briefly, we were hoping that fathers during the closure would realize how important their role might be by becoming active parents. They are less satisfied with the gender labor division within their families than before the crisis. This means they have not learned the lesson we were hoping they would.

Divorced fathers are already asking for court orders for less child-support because their income has suffered. We are expecting a wave of divorce in the legal field in which women suffered harsh discrimination. It becomes more and more unfriendly to mothers due to the battles of fathers' groups and the anti-feminist agenda. An important lesson we have learned from this crisis is the crucial importance of intersectionality.

Old women and young women, Bedouin women, women in prostitution, asylum-seekers all experienced the crisis more harshly and in special ways than the rest. We must have this intersectionality to understand this. We have to look at the gendered outcomes of closure because we are facing the second wave. This is a picture from what we saw every evening on TV. Four men explaining to us what to do and how to understand the crisis.

There are no women to be seen around most of the tables. We need gender sensitive data. We realize how crucial the work of feminist NGOs are and we will hear from the wonderful women in this panel. We need to monitor the labor force and the state budget.

To end on a note of hope, we are facing new ways to combat domestic violence. Hopefully, this will continue after the crisis. Hopefully again, we will manage to learn the lessons from the last three months and move forward with that. Not all fathers, but maybe some of you will join our battle for shared labor division at home and in the labor force. The media is supportive to the gender dimension of the crisis. Maybe as we realize this, we have to move back to welfare states that protects all of us. We are all vulnerable. Not only during COVID-19, but just as human beings. Thank you.

>> FACILITATOR: Olya, I think you can begin.

>> RABBI OLYA WEINSTEIN: I am grateful for being invited to speak. I am Rabbi Olya Weinstein. I've lived in Israel for half my life. I was ordained as a Rabbi last year. I am the mother of three and together with my family, I live in Jerusalem. My organization engages about 5000 women annually. Project Keshet helps prevent gender violence and racism. We usually fight for discrimination and educate for the equal status of women and girls.

Project Keshet has become a leading voice not only in the Russian community, but for all women. The project has

responded to the situations. Our participants and project participants are vulnerable to economic instability. When the Israeli welfare system and immigrant services are over-burdened, Project Keshet provides connection and education, inspiration and emotional support and have become a lifeline for hundreds of Russian-speaking people in the situation.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the project volunteers have helped Russians and single mothers receive government assistance through deliveries and bringing elderly Israelis to the doctors and pharmacies. For the past two weeks, Project Keshet Israel volunteers were delivering food parcels for Shabbat to 100 pensioners and single mothers in those cities. This project was underwritten by an emergency grant received from the Council on Aging.

Many women in our network are unemployed including single mothers. Women who are too young to qualify for pension as well. In most instances, these immigrants do not have the necessary skills to understand how to access government and social service programs. This is taught via Zoom on a weekly basis, their resources for support. We offer opportunities for the participants to ask questions.

On a weekly basis, they record a video that reflects Project Keshet Israel's commitment to equality and women's leadership. Some rabbis give a brief teaching. I'm the first woman rabbi to do these teachings in the Russian community. This project has already received a lot of feedback from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. We hope to continue this until the pandemic ends. Thank you so much and I'm now happy to invite my friend Michal to speak.

>> MICHAL AVERA: Hi everyone. I am Michal. I am the CEO for the Fidel Association. I'm an educational and social activist and a mother of three. I live not far away from Tel Aviv. This is for integration of the Ethiopian community in Israel and into society. I want to share with you two inspiring stories from our work with the Ethiopian community during the corona crisis.

When the corona crisis began, we asked our team, what does the community need the most right now? How can we be relevant? Available? Useful to our community? How can we think out-of-the-box? First, we work with single mothers. The first group hurt by the crisis was single mothers. They suddenly found themselves without food and certain items. They were afraid during the Passover holiday.

Fidel Association has been a grassroots organization with a strong presence in the communities. We have helped thousands of single mothers suffering during this economy. We supplied them with food baskets and computers. We realized it was the first thing they most needed to survive. Besides the food baskets brought to the families and single mothers, we help them to feel secure and how to get support from the government.

The other thing that we are proud to talk about is the young leadership program. We discovered how our youth works and we work with them throughout the year. They mapped out the neighborhoods and decided who needed what the most. They brought food and called on them. More than 200 teenagers helped. These kids can be part of the Israeli society and become leaders. We were immensely proud.

We found the strength of the community and how we can all work together and change our minds for the neighborhoods in the community. This has helped us to create a new environment during this situation. People get together and help and support each other. We sent messages by voicemail and telephone. It was a powerful moment for us to work together and see what the future can hold for us to get a better understanding. How we can

force the authorities to be more prepared? This is what we did.

Thank you for listening. Take care. Be safe. We do not have a doubt about our power as women around the world and around the country. Thank you. It is my pleasure and honor to invite my colleague Fida to speak.

>> FIDA NARA: Good evening and good morning all. I am Fida Nara. I am a Palestinian woman who lives in Israel. I have two daughters. I have been an activist in the political and feminist side. I see the relation between both. I will talk about education and feminist grassroots organization.

We work on the periphery in Israel and the social periphery. We have communities in South Tel Aviv and in the extremely poor neighborhoods of Jerusalem. We of course have communities all over the country. What is really unique about Mahapach-Taghir is over the last 20 years, we have worked to build and empower communities. Especially poor communities in Israel to take more responsibility over their lives and work together and make changes in their lives in villages or cities.

We understand in the COVID-19 crisis. The powerful thing we had here before the crisis is going to continue and have more power during the crisis. At the same time, the people who pay the most during this crisis are the poor communities all over Israel. I will talk about the economic price and the education educational price. Poor communities have a lot of problems. It's not just people having lack of access to Internet to learn online. It is sometimes they don't have the space to sit at home and learn.

I will talk more about the good things that give me more hope, even during this crisis. I will begin with one example. When we talk about community, we talk about community resilience. This means people feel solidarity with each other. They have responsibility about their lives. They think about others and not just themselves. This is something good that we feel in here in this crisis all over the world. When you have a good work in the community, you can feel it.

With Mahapach-Taghir each community decides their needs. Their leaders from the communities are groups of women and/or children who are already active in their community. They take responsibility of things that are happening in their communities. One example is we realize the children in one community do not have games in their home. So, the women decided to collect games or money to buy games. When I talk about collecting money, imagine a woman who donates five dollars can feel like she's part of the community, part of a big project.

This was a small community near Nazareth. We gave more than 800 games to children in those neighborhoods. This is something we collect from families who do not want the games or a we get a small monetary donation from women. This is in poor neighborhoods. You can have the empowerment to feel you can give and be part of making a change. You feel your responsibility in your life. You feel the responsibility that you can make a change. There are communities that collect food and there are those that collect other things, that we need for the corona crisis. So that everybody can buy things for their families.

The other thing that we feel strongly about in this crisis is volunteering. This is how we build solidarity between communities. When we have that solidarity -- and I don't just mean our communities but poor neighborhoods all

over Israel, Arab and Jewish -- we decided during the crisis we will do a national meeting between Arabs and Jewish people on Zoom. On one meeting, we had more than 100 students who sat together and learned together how they can continue to build relationships with the kids they worked with before the crisis.

Also, the students begin to understand how they feel similar things. Their fear, their hopes, their problems were the same. We are the same. We have the same reality. It brings more solidarity and understanding. During this crisis, it helps us all over the world and all over Israel to see we are all equal before this virus.

The amazing thing that happens is we have a national meeting for the women and they decided to do a positive campaign. They say women have the power and the positivity and lead their families. Let's give them more positive ideas and positive things that women do in their families and communities. Our positive campaign is that the women worked for two weeks to help them understand in this crisis, you have the power to make change in a small way and take more responsibility in the community.

These are really small things that we do during the crisis. I really want to thank you all for listening. And thank you for the National Council of Jewish Women for listening. I want to introduce my friend Fainy to continue talking about their work. Thank you.

>> FAINY SUKENIK: Hello everyone and good evening. I am Fainy Sukenik, social activist here in Israel. Many times, COVID-19 has closed everyone into their homes. This began with the first wave of the pandemic when we understood something is going on that is worse than other communities in Israel. I don't have enough time to talk about all the reasons. The fact that everything COVID-19 affects in our work makes it crucial.

I want to share with you some things we did during the first wave and what I think sadly we should continue doing. I am the chair and founder of an organization of Ba'asher Telchi. Ba'asher Telchi helps families. We have help more than 3000 women all over Israel. People who have lost income. There were so many women out of money for food and their children for the first time, we sent money. This is not charity. We give them tools to build themselves up.

Some women called us up and said, they didn't have enough money to take care of their families or themselves or to buy diapers and they have no help. So, we had no choice but to send money. The Haredi neighborhood at the time was closed and did not have the opportunity to buy food, so we sent them money. We used the Army and everyone we could. We used ambulances to send money to some of our members that live in Haifa.

We sent them games for the children because we knew our families were dealing with everything alone. They had no computers. They had to be with their children 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was awfully hard on them.

Every night we did a zoom workshop for the women. I think it was for 50 women that connected every night for 2 1/2 months. It was the first mature face they saw during that day. Every night they connected and we gave them a lecture on how to deal with child support, etc. We had lawyers, therapists and financial advisors for them.

One of the more important things we did was it was the first time they had to do something by themselves. They were incredibly stressed out by the idea of doing this. So, we arranged a night to handout materials and we had

rabbis come in to speak to help bring up their spirits because we knew how hard it was.

We also dealt with discrimination in hospitals against Orthodox women. It was something I found out. I heard a story about a Haredi woman that was sent to hospital in labor and they didn't let her come into the hospital. Every Haredi woman and man was suspected of having coronavirus. So, they let her wait outside the hospital for three hours before they let her in. There was another Haredi woman in the room that was supposed to be only for Haredi women that are suspected to have coronavirus. It was a huge risk for her and her baby.

I was shocked by this at the beginning. We then understood, this is not one story. There were hundreds of stories like this for Haredi women that were pregnant and having their babies. The hospitals did not want them to come in. Sometimes it was unpleasant but other times, it was unprofessional. I know a few stories about women who lost their babies just because they did not get their checkups. The doctors didn't want to come to certain neighborhoods in Jerusalem.

One woman came and said that she could not feel her baby move and they sent her back because she is a Haredi. Two days later she had a miscarriage. When I understood this was going on, we had an emergency Zoom meeting to do whatever it takes. We opened up a group for every Haredi woman to join in and tell her story about the hospitals and health services and how they were treated.

If you see the presentation, you see one picture of a sweater with a yellow sticker on it. This was a Haredi woman that came to the hospital to have her baby and she was marked. This was just before Holocaust Day here in Israel. We were so shocked by this. It was a big yellow sticker. Markers mean being treated differently and unprofessionally.

We started talking about the stories on TV and radio and Haredi media and non-Haredi media. We used whatever we could to make the hospitals, doctors and nurses and everybody understand we will not be silent about this. We wanted to make things better for the Haredi women and keep them from being infected. They should not be treated in this unprofessional way when they're coming in to have a baby. Imagine the experience of a new mother waiting to have her first baby. And the nurse who was supposed to help her does not want to get close to her, because she's afraid.

We did all this and we wrote a letter to the health ministry. We collected signatures of so many organizations that stood with us and said this is wrong. You should not work like this. The health ministry said write down specific criteria and all the hospitals should go by it. This made noise in the country and hopefully it will make change. Even though we have COVID-19 in this community, this is not the way to treat people. Thank you.

>> FACILITATOR: Thank you everyone. I'm sure there are many questions that we have after hearing about your thoughtful stories. I want to put out questions to the audience as to how you plan to put the stories out to your community.