



Country Brief 2



International Labour Organization
Regional Office for Arab States

Building Safe Passage for Women's Employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

This country brief presents an overview of the research and policy advocacy activities of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on gender equality in the world of work in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It highlights the overall employment context, underlining concerns, results achieved and future plans.

Socio-Economic Situation:

The economic impacts of the 40-year Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been devastating for Palestinian workers and their families, particularly since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000.

Every year since 1981 the ILO has issued an annual report on the situation of workers in the Occupied Arab Territories. In the latest report the ILO expresses concerns about Separation Barrier, closures and permit requirements that continue to limit the opportunities for Palestinian men and women to look for jobs, exercise their professions and run businesses in an economically viable manner (ILO, 2008).



Only one in every three people of working age is employed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

A profound employment crisis is affecting Palestinian workers throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Enterprises operate far below potential capacity, businesses are routinely shut down, and new investment projects are deferred or shelved. Workers work less than full time, lose their jobs and search for alternatives that are unpredictable or inadequately remunerated, leaving their families to struggle with various coping strategies (ILO, 2008a).

Historically, employment of women has been concentrated in agriculture, often as contributing family workers, and in services mostly in the public sector. The crisis has accentuated this pattern. In the last quarter of 2007, employment of women was 48.9 per cent in services and 33.7 per cent in agriculture (ILO, 2008a).

In the absence of sufficient income-earning opportunities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, many jobless Palestinian men, women and children venture into Israeli settlements for work in homes, businesses and agriculture. Tens of thousands of others also enter Israel without permits to work for long hours in agriculture, construction, and other businesses for less than the minimum wage. In addition, they lack adequate protection against work hazards and have to settle for unsafe and unhealthy living arrangements in the fields, construction sites, and urban undergrounds (ILO, 2008b). Some 35,000 young people join the labour force annually. Unemployment among young people is already very high, reaching 50 per cent in the Gaza Strip and 30 per cent in the West Bank in 2007 (ILO, 2008a).

In the last quarter of 2007, the total unemployment rate among women was 17 per cent, lower than the unemployment rate of 23.4 per cent among men. The lower rate of women's



unemployment, however, should be seen in the context of the low labour force participation of women (15.5 per cent). Women's unemployment is significantly higher for those with higher education. Women with lower levels of education are among discouraged workers who do not declare themselves as unemployed.

More than three fourths of unemployed women had over 13 years of schooling while most unemployed men have lower levels of education, with 85 per cent having completed less than 13 years of schooling (ILO, 2008b).

ILO and Gender Equality at Work:

Highlights on Women's Employment

- Women's labour force participation rate is low at 15.5 per cent (PCBS, 2008).
- Informally employed women account for six out of 10 women workers (ILO, 2008b).
- The unemployment rate among women with 13 or more years of schooling is 28.8 percent (PCBS,2008).
- At 46 percent, unemployment rate of young women between the ages of 20-24 is the highest rate among all age groups, men and women (Ibid).

The ILO has three ongoing initiatives on gender equality and decent work in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during 2008-2009:

- I. Gender equality and workers' rights in the informal economy
- II. Business women in private sector and women's enterprise development
- III. The Spanish Millennium Development Global Fund on Gender Equality and Women's empowerment in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

I. Gender equality and workers' rights in the informal economy:

The ILO and the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) have launched a regional initiative in several countries of the region (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia, West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Yemen) in order to: Develop a better understanding of informality of

employment in the region using a gender equality and workers' rights perspective; Contribute to a more favorable policy and institutional environment to provide better legal and social coverage for the working poor, especially women; Mainstream Arab States into the global discussion on informal employment; and Establish sex-disaggregated data and gender-responsive indicators in household and labour force surveys to capture women's informal work, especially work from home.

Within this initiative, the study, "Unprotected Employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Gender Equality and Workers' Rights Perspective," was published in Arabic and English (Hilal, et. al. 2008).

The authors of the study note that "it is impossible to discuss informal employment and social protection in the West Bank and Gaza Strip without specifying the colonial-settler nature of Israeli occupation, and the ensuing unique socio-economic and political context of the territories occupied in 1967."

This paper adopts an operational definition of informality focusing on the characteristics of the jobs rather than on the characteristics of the production units. The lack of adequate social protection, a violation of a basic human and social right, is the defining characteristic of the definition of informality used.

The study points out that the volume of informal employment in the Palestinian labour force within the West Bank and Gaza Strip has decreased since 2000, although still very high. This decline is attributed to the heightened restrictions for workers to enter Israel without permits, and the corresponding increase in unemployment. This rise has been accompanied by a process of impoverishment and localization of the Palestinian labour force in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Women represent less than 6 per cent of all informally employed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The low level of representation of Palestinian women in informal work is partly due to structural limitations of the economy as well as to ideological and cultural constraints. Even if there is some possible underestimation of women's home-based economic activities in the available datasets, the Palestinian labour markets are highly

gender-segregated, offering women access to a very limited number of sectors. Moreover, these few sectors are in non-growth areas of the economy and cannot absorb new women labour market entrants. There are also a large number of discouraged workers among women.

The authors of the study highlight the relationship between informal employment and non-employment in West Bank and Gaza Strip. When the unemployed find a job they are likely to be confined to insecure and unprotected work.

The study was presented during a Regional Expert Group Meeting on gender equality and workers' rights in the informal economies of Arab States held in Tunis in July 2008. Representatives from a number of Palestinian institutions from the West Bank attended the meeting, including Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Federation of Palestinian Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions and the Ministry of Labour.

A series of round tables are underway for policy makers, representatives of civil society, United Nations agencies and academics providing an opportunity to inform action.

II. Women's entrepreneurship development:

Women in the private sector

The study on "A Situational and Institutional Assessment of Business Women in West Bank" is a joint research initiative of the ILO and Riyada Consulting and Training on businesswomen in the West Bank (ILO, 2008c).

The research examines the opportunities and constraints currently facing women-owned businesses in West Bank. It assesses the level of women's involvement in the predominant private sector institutions, including the chambers of commerce and industry and business development service providers. The study is being published in Arabic and English along with a policy brief for discussion during expert policy round tables that will be taking place in the fall of 2008 in four different locations in the West Bank.

The study points out the following findings on women-owned enterprises: Women-owned enterprises are growing in number at all levels, but constitute only 5 per cent of all enterprises; Women

entrepreneurs are by and large dependent on the support of husbands or male relatives in the form of finance, business advice and encouragement; Women make up only 1.5 per cent of all members of chambers of commerce and industry where Bethlehem has the highest level of women membership at 7 per cent; Business Development Service (BDS) providers reach women-owned businesses, which are over represented among the lower income beneficiaries of services and BDS providers are often providing the same services to men and women without tailoring programs to specific needs; The vast majority of women entrepreneurs do not borrow from banks and microfinance institutions; and The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) System remains small, fragmented, and largely unresponsive to the needs of the labour market. The system is also highly gender segregated along traditional lines. The system doesn't encourage entrepreneurship among TVET graduates.

Gender and Entrepreneurship Together

Gender and Entrepreneurship Together (GET Ahead) is an ILO gender training package that is aimed at assisting ILO partner organizations to promote enterprise development among poor women who want to be, or already are, engaged in small-scale business through market-oriented business services. It emphasizes the importance of the household and cooperatives in ensuring success of women entrepreneurs.

A training of trainers on GET Ahead was conducted in March 2008 in Amman. Representatives of NGOs, Business Women Associations and Training Centers in the West Bank participated in the training. The participants were exposed to entrepreneurship development for rural women including value chain analysis as an economic literacy tool and business group formation.

III. The Spanish Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment:

The ILO has participated in a joint initiative with the UN country team under the Spanish Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F) on "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Occupied Palestinian Territory". The initiative is designed to promote Palestinian women's social, economic and political empowerment through three outcomes:

Reducing gender-based violence and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; Increasing the representation of women in decision-making bodies and bringing about women's issues to the policy forefront; and Enhancing women's opportunities for equal economic participation.

Within this joint initiative, the ILO interventions focus primarily on creating an enabling environment that is favorable for women's economic empowerment, including: Increasing the influence of gender advocates and workers' and employers' organizations in decision making and planning by reforming discriminatory labour laws and planning for gender-sensitive employment opportunities; Strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Labour (including relevant departments and units) and workers' and employers' organizations to implement specific measures that promote women's employment and protect them in the workplace; and Increasing employment opportunities for low-income women and young women graduates, including those in refugee camps.

Capacity Building: Participatory Gender Audit:

The ILO is committed to promoting tools for mainstreaming gender equality in the world of work. Participatory gender auditing as an organizational learning tool implemented across the world and translated and pilot tested in Yemen. The ILO has sponsored an official from the Ministry of Women's Affairs to participate in a training course in its International Training Center in Turin in May 2008.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs is currently developing a strategy to implement participatory gender audits within institutions of the Palestinian Authority.

ILO Activities on Gender Equality (2009-11)

Under the Spanish MDG Fund, a number of initiatives will be undertaken including: An institutional assessment on Ministry of Labour's strengths, weaknesses, and needs to mainstream gender equality considerations; Development of a strategy for the employers' organizations to mainstream gender equality considerations in their work; Consultations with workers' organizations about organizing women and men workers in the informal economy; Further sessions of training of trainers on GET Ahead for Women in Enterprise Development with business women associations,

and other relevant institutions; Official launch and policy discussion of the two studies "Unprotected Employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Gender Equality and Workers' Rights Perspective" and "A Situation and Institutional Assessment of Business Women in the West Bank"; and Mapping of TVET institutions, programmes and activity with the potential of developing a national frame work for TVET in Occupied Palestinian Territory.



All activities will also be coordinated with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and will target all labour governance institutions, namely the Ministry of Labour, workers' and employers' organizations.

References:

ILO. 2008a. Report of the Director-General on the situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories. (Geneva). [English & Arabic].

www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_092729.pdf

ILO. 2008b. Unprotected Employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Gender Equality and Workers' Rights Perspective, Regional Office for Arab States (Beirut). [English & Arabic].

www.ilo.org/gender/Informationresources/lang---en/docName---WCMS_097715/index.htm

ILO. 2008c. A Situational and Institutional Analysis of Business Women in the West Bank. ILO Regional Office for Arab States and Riyada Consulting (Beirut). [English & Arabic].

PCBS. 2008. Labour Force Survey (October- December, 2007) Round (Q4/2007). Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. (Ramallah).

http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/tect-e.pdf

Contact information:

International Labour Organization

Regional Office for Arab States
Aresco Centre, 11th & 12th floors
Justinien Street, Kantari, Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: (961) 1 752400 Fax: (961) 1 752406

Jerusalem Office
P.O. Box 51359
Tel: (972) 2 6260212 Fax: (972) 2 627646

<http://www.ilo.org.lb> <http://www.ilo.org/gender>

Photo Credits: Separation Wall (Maurizio Bussi), and woman agricultural worker in Gaza Strip (AFP).