

Integrating Arab Caretakers in Kibbutz kindergartens – Challenges and Coping Methods

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Thematic importance: The Arab society in Israel is undergoing transition which includes changes in the gender power balance and in more women working outside of home. At the same time, Arab women face exclusion and discrimination in the Israeli society. The current study focused on one unique way these women tried to move away from the Arab society – by choosing to work in a vastly different environment – as caretakers in kibbutz kindergartens. Those women are mainly responsible for the children's needs during the day but are also involved in their socialization process. As the kibbutz educational system is based on the ecological system, stressing connecting the children to their natural environment, they were reluctant to employ any outsider to work in the kindergartens. However, over the last few years the kibbutz education system has opened up to Arab caretakers, but it is not clear how well this change is perceived by its members.

Introduction and objectives: The study examined how Arab caretakers in their work at the kibbutz perceive themselves and the challenges they face during their work.

Method: Fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Arab caretakers working in kibbutz kindergartens in Israel, most of whom live in Arab villages or cities.

Results: Three themes were identified in the interviews. The first referred to the degree the interviewees identified themselves as secular Israelis or a combined identity between their Muslim Arab one and a civil Israeli one. The second theme focused on how their family reacted to their decision to work in a kibbutz and their decisions to adopt Western and kibbutz behaviors that sometimes contradict the

traditional Arab norms and values. The third theme referred to the perceived conditional acceptance they received by the kibbutz society.

All of these themes affected their role as caregivers, and the care they provided not only to the kibbutz children in kindergartens but also to the way they educate their private children.

Conclusions and implications: This study presents for the first time the unique situation of Arab women coming from a traditional patriarchal society working in the Jewish education system in a kibbutz. This situation challenges both the Arab women and the kibbutz education system as it requires both to step out of their comfort zone and test new ways of operating. The main recommendation is that it is vitally important to create a systemic training model that would include both individual supervision and support to the Arab caretakers in coping with the challenges they face, as well as individual and group training to other staff members in the education system to increase their awareness of the issue.

In the present study only Arab caregivers were interviewed and not other relevant factors - such as children, kindergarten teachers or other staff and principals in kibbutz education systems. Interviews with all these factors will give a more comprehensive overview of the way in which the Arab caregivers work affects children's lives and well-being.