

## **Coronavirus crisis is exacting price from women and the elderly, while the gov't ignores solutions**

**While the government has relied largely on unemployment payments to deal with the crisis, this is unlikely to be enough to deal with such a unique and complex situation in the long-term**

Or Kashti | Jul. 3, 2020 | 10:43 PM

Like every social phenomenon, the coronavirus crisis has exacerbated societal gaps. Both the social and economic impacts of the pandemic have hit already vulnerable social groups the hardest, including women and the elderly. Isolation and a lack of financial security leaves many on the edge of a cliff.

In May, The National Insurance Institute disbursed unemployment payments to 820,000 people. The NII has approved a million new unemployment applications since the crisis began (rejecting 85,000 as ineligible). The rate of people seeking employment is 20 percent, according to the employment service.

Most of those who filed for unemployment had worked in small businesses. A report by the Knesset's research and information center two weeks ago estimated that some 70,000 business will close this year.

The NII's research administration recently also published a simulation indicating that the coronavirus crisis caused an increase in poverty rates, hitting many middle-class families. Meanwhile, according to the simulation, the situation of those who were already in poverty deteriorated further.

While government intervention relied mainly on unemployment benefits early in the crisis, it is unlikely that this model is suited to coping with this unique crisis in the long-term.

Welfare researchers in the crisis team of experts recommended that the social safety be adapted to to this new socioeconomic reality by expanding unemployment benefit rights to include the self-employed.

Another recommendation, debated in recent months among cabinet ministers, but not advanced, offers a more comprehensive solution than what is currently available – a special payment made directly to bank accounts without requiring an application and with minimal bureaucracy.

Several countries have already tried various versions of universal basic income. This idea may seem subversive, however in a situation in which hundreds of thousands of families in Israel are coping with solvency

problems, and the state only has partial information about the situation, the state is responsible for helping its citizens reach a basic income.

An additional 1,000-2,000 shekels (\$290-\$580) every month as needed would help people to keep their heads above water. Such a payment doesn't differentiate between wage earners, the self-employed or the unemployed but rather firstly examines the needs of the individual and family. This is how the government should proceed in such a severe crisis.

### **Dignity for the elderly**

“We wanted to hope the numbers would go down and we could continue with our routine, but the numbers are surging and there are ill people everywhere,” an assisted living facility in the Sharon region announced a few days ago. “Therefore, we decided that the gates will be closed until the situation improves. Family visits will not be allowed and residents will leave the village for medical reasons only.” Similar rules were posted in Mishan nursing homes in Holon, and an aid organization in central Israel also canceled family visits until the situation changes.

The fear of coronavirus infection cannot be the only factor in managing an elderly population. It also demands constant defense of elder rights, a complex job requiring sensitivity to differences in functionality levels, is also required, from ensuring they can make decisions for themselves to access to information, privacy and dignity. The conditions of functioning people who decided to move to an assisted living home does not need to be so different from those of their friends who remained at home. There is no legal (or medical, or ethical) validity to restricting the movements of elderly people in care homes or facilities.

Around 89,000 elderly resident live in various facilities, for which responsibility is divided among the welfare, health, housing and immigrant absorption ministries. The first two ministries have thus far ignored the requests of attorney Yael Havassy-Aharoni of Tel Aviv University, in the name of several organizations, to inform the institutions they regulate that they must stop restricting movement and prohibiting visits.

Employment and unemployment benefits for those over 67 also need to be reformed, and the plague of loneliness among the elderly must also be reckoned with.

### **Women pushed aside**

The impact of the coronavirus crisis on women is particularly prominent, among them the increase in complaints regarding family violence and the higher rate of women being furloughed or fired. Shutting down the school

system and placing the responsibility for childcare and household management on women also exacerbated gender inequality. Only after a High Court of Justice ruling was the absence of women among teams advising the government on the coronavirus partially resolved.

As Haaretz's Lee Yaron wrote two months ago using employment service data, women comprised 55 percent of all job seekers in March and April and 60 percent of the under-24 cohort. The Adva Center and the Van Leer Institute recently published a document with data showing that the median monthly wage of women who were laid off because of the crisis was 5,600 shekels (and 4,800 and 4,300 among Haredi women and Arab women, respectively), compared to 7,500 shekels for men. Among the self-employed, the average grant to women was 3,132 shekels, some 1,400 shekels less than what men received.

The minimum salary for employers to receive a grant for bringing employees back to work was 3,300, while some 20 percent of furloughed women earned less than 3,100 shekels, so employers had much less of an incentive to bring them back compared to men.

The state's failure to address violence against women even before the crisis had dire consequences during the lockdown. Complaints of partner abuse filed with the police and reports of family violence to the Welfare Ministry soared. Eight women have been murdered since the crisis began in March (and 13 this year in total). Women's organizations aiding victims of violence report a collapse.

As it had before, the government continues to hesitate. A session of the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality revealed that tens of millions of shekels disappeared from the budget for the national program to prevent violence against women. The Finance Ministry released only some of the amount earmarked for the plan.

Still, there is a small glimmer of hope. According to Prof. Daphna Hacker of Tel Aviv University, success in some of the battles in recent weeks – like the one to prevent the firing of pregnant women or the hesitant adjustment of women's representation in the National Security Council – was made possible thanks to deeper cooperation than ever between feminist groups. This is probably a lesson for all groups representing disadvantaged populations.