

Wafah Tayara Goes To Work

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Inner peace, strong character, carefully weighed words – these are the impressions one gets from Wafah Tayara, 32, from Kufr Qara. She is among the first Arab women to join the Workers' Advice Center (WAC), opening the way to organized labor for others.

I first met Wafah in March 2004, when she entered the Center's office in Um al-Fahm with her husband, Nur. They were looking for jobs in agriculture. Nur had worked for two and a half

Wafah was then one of the many Arab women in Israel that do not work outside the home. (Only 17% do, compared with 50% of Jewish women.) Because of Nur's illness, she entered the job market a year and a half ago. This changed her life. She discovered that she had leadership qualities and a talent for organizing.

When Wafah married at age 19, she had ambitions of continuing her studies. As with many Arab women, however, she succumbed to the routine of married life as children arrived:

America, "because if you've understood America," she says, "you've understood the world." She burned with desire to get more out of life. "I wanted to do something and didn't know what."

Nur was the family's only breadwinner, earning NIS 5500 (\$1200) monthly. When his back went, a simple question demanded an immediate answer: What will we live on? Wafah went to the first personnel ("manpower") company that she found. It offered her a job in agriculture. Ever since the 1990's (when most textile plants moved to countries with cheaper labor), agriculture has been practically the only branch available to women from the Arab villages.



Wafa Tayara at work in the fields. Photo by Challenge.

years within the framework of WAC's program, "A Job to Win," but a back problem forced him to leave construction for a year while receiving treatment.

Muhammad (13), Wasim (12), Islam (4) and Karim (2). As a temporary solution, she undertook a project of self-enrichment. Her library includes novels, medical encyclopedias and books about

The struggle to work outside the home

Despite the obvious need, Nur at first opposed Wafah's decision to work. Then came angry responses from his family: how can you let your wife do such a thing?! Even when Nur's condition worsened, and they saw him limping about, his family did not budge. As for Wafah's family, they pitied her, for she had always been, as she puts it, the "spoiled" one.

What about her friends? Their opinions were divided. Some opposed the step, holding that Nur's family should provide for the family. Some even suggested she abandon Nur, to which she answered: "If I were bedridden, would I want him to leave me?" Other friends encouraged her to work, saying that the main thing was feeding the family.

The argument was finally settled by the pile of bills that accumulated during the year of unemployment.

From home to field

Wafah's life went through a radical change from her first days of work. During her years as a housewife, time had lain heavy on her hands: "Like the rest of my friends, after sending the kids to school I would go back to sleep. Then I'd do housework, then help my husband's family or take part in all kinds of social events and visits. I used to wonder what to do with all the leftover time.

"Now that's changed. Time has taken on new meaning. I start work on the farm at five in the morning. I have to do my shopping afterwards, cook and iron clothes the night before. I've developed a list of priorities. Housework is exhausting, and it demands that the whole family cooperate. My son Wasim helps me hang laundry. At first he hung everything crooked, but he's gotten better." Nur, who sat nearby, revealed, "I also help hang laundry. But I do it in secret. If one of the neighbors looks in our direction, I hide." He adds: "I never took care of the children before, but for the year I was ill, I changed Karim's diapers."

Wafah and Nur now work together with a WAC team in agriculture, so neither can get the kids off to school. The eldest, Muhammad, is responsible for this. After getting them washed and dressed and fed, he takes Karim to the day-care center of the Local Council, Islam to private day care, and from there he walks with Wasim to the elementary school.

Debate about farm work

One factor in the debate about Wafah's taking a job was the nature of work in agriculture. First, it is hard physical labor, outdoors. "Our culture taught us," she said, "that only clean office work is respectable. The wise and successful are there. Manual labor is supposed to be a sign of failure."

Second, when the work comes via a personnel company, the conditions are

awful: no benefits, no national insurance. The pay is miserable. A man will get NIS 100 -130 per day (NIS 100 = \$22), a woman NIS 85. (The legal minimum is NIS 144.)

Wafah: "The low wage of the female farm worker derives from low regard for her labor. Money expresses the degree of appreciation for a person's effort. When I worked through the personnel company, I felt that I was making an effort and neglecting my home, but the return was meager. I wasn't appreciated. Today I work under WAC's protection. I get the minimum wage plus complete benefits. I'm convinced that the higher pay improves the self-image of the worker."

Wafah tells how one of her sons was having difficulty with his lessons,



Wafah and her son Islam at home. Photo by Challenge.

and his teacher scolded him: "What do you come to school for? Go work in construction and be a flop like your father." Nur entered the conversation again, saying how low he felt when his son reported this. Wafah did something rare for a woman of her village. She went and complained, persuading the school to hold a meeting of parents and teachers on the subject of labor.

The economic situation in Israel has become so bad that field labor,

which was thought to be basically for women, has also been drawing men. "When I worked through the personnel company," says Wafah, "each day we used to have to declare the numbers of men and women separately – for example, 'Today we are five men and five women' – because men are paid more. Today, when I work through WAC, everyone gets the same wage according to law, it's enough to say, 'Today we are ten.'"

In one camp with the Palestinians

The WAC team has an agreement with the farm that promises its members the minimum wage and full social benefits. This arrangement soon created friction with other workers there, who get the illegal wage mentioned above, without benefits. These include about 25 from the Galilean villages of Kfar Manda and Ibelin who work through personnel companies. There is a similar number of Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, as well as workers from Thailand.

The Palestinians work longer whenever they can, in order to get maximum benefit from their work permits: they can never be sure that they'll be allowed back into Israel. "They say we're spoiled," says Wafah. "They think that with the Israeli ID in our hands we have a treasure – so why do we come and take away the only thing left to them, the hard labor of agriculture? I try to persuade them that we belong to one camp and that our struggle must be in common."

I replied, "There are some among the Arabs in Israel who see things otherwise. They see the Palestinians as the ones who take their jobs. What do you say to them?"

"I say, 'Where is your conscience? A person under siege, imprisoned behind fences and walls, without livelihood,

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what's he to do? How is he to live?' I tell my Arab friends in Israel not to stick up their noses at the Palestinian women. It's only right for Israel to give them work. And if it doesn't, there'll be an explosion."

One topic preoccupies the Palestinian women, says Wafah: the checkpoint, the identity card and the work permit. When Israel slaps closure on the Territories, it issues work permits only to those who have to harvest olives on the other side of the separation barrier. Many decide to forgo the olives and sell their permits to workers for NIS 1000 each.

Wafah says: "One of the Palestinians who works with us is pregnant, and she has to push and shove along with everyone else in the revolving gates of the checkpoints. The crowding is so bad that people get hurt from the iron bars. They have to leave home at 0230 in order to stand in the long line at the checkpoint, but even then they arrive late.

"The only way we'll get free from slavery will be through our own struggle. No one else will liberate us. I put a lot of hope in WAC, even though we're still small. We could never rely on the Histadrut [National Federation of Labor in Israel – A.A.]. It respected only Jewish workers. Membership wasn't a matter of free choice, because it was a precondition for getting health insurance. With WAC we have the choice of joining or not, so it has to offer real benefits in order to get and keep its members." ■