



‘Leap into life’

WIZO has been fighting for Israel’s women for 102 years.

In a daycare center where one teacher is expected to care for six children, it is difficult if not impossible to reach every child.

“It’s hard and it is painful,” said Orly Sharabi, who runs a WIZO daycare center in Tel Aviv. She has been working with the organization for 33 years and told The Jerusalem Post that in recent years the situation has become “inhuman.”

“To be a daycare worker is to do a million things at once and our salary is very low,” Sharabi said. “We impart values, education, change diapers, clean and wash.”

“There are situations where one caregiver has to take over 30 children aged three and the class opens,” Sharabi continued. “Sometimes the cook does not come either, so one of us leaves everything to cook food for everyone... We want to give everything, but it is impossible... And we are not rewarded, to say the least.”

In Israel, funding for the country’s daycare programs has not been increased in a decade. The ratio of caretaker to infant is one of the highest in the Western world and staff are grossly underpaid. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the situation even more, creating a deficit of staff who either chose not to come to work anymore, were sick or in isolation.

At the same time, multiple studies have shown that women were hardest hit by coronavirus – losing their jobs or being forced to leave their employment to care for their families and they are now struggling to reenter the marketplace.

Domestic abuse spiked in Israel and worldwide, too.

“We are in a critical situation,” said Anita Friedman, Chairperson of World WIZO, whose organization has been fighting for women’s rights and empowerment for more than 100 years.

WIZO has been at the forefront of the battle to get daycare staff the benefits they deserve, has built daycares and a network of schools, provides abused women with shelter and all women the support they need to succeed.

According to Friedman, the Israeli daycare system is lacking around 2,000 caretakers, putting extra pressure on those who do come to work and making it difficult for new parents to find care for their children.

“If a daycare caretaker has to come and take care of five or six babies, and they work extremely hard and get low pay, they do not want to come to us or, if they do, they leave us quickly,” Friedman explained. She said the government regulates how many kids per classroom and the salaries, making it

almost impossible to effect change in these areas.

Her organization has been at the forefront of the battle to amend the country’s daycare system, both to give these working women a salary they can live on and also to ensure the country’s future. As Friedman explained, “from birth to age 3, the personality of a child is shaped. If we do not give them the right tools, we all suffer afterwards.”

WIZO WAS FOUNDED 102 years ago and centers on three major pillars: Early childhood education, education and the status of women in Israeli society.

The organization operates 177 daycare centers, including 19 that are run by the welfare ministry for children who are at-risk for several reasons. It also manages five youth villages – a program that Friedman describes as “a combination between an agriculture school and a Swiss boarding school – and three specialized schools. Some 98% of the children who go through one of WIZO’s school programs complete their matriculation exams successfully and almost 100% of students enroll in the IDF.

In addition, WIZO runs two shelters for abused women and children, three violence prevention centers and a myriad of other related projects.

“We look at the issue holistically,” Friedman explained. “We have projects not only for weaker women but also for stronger women. We are creating the leaders of tomorrow and training women to make changes in our society.”

In total, the organization employs 6,000 workers who run 800 projects and programs from Eilat to the North.

FRIEDMAN IS the conductor.

“My mom and grandma were part of WIZO,” Friedman said during a Zoom interview, remembering her childhood in Colombia, where she was raised knowing about the importance of the organization.

She made Aliyah and learned about WIZO in Israel more during college, but it was during her 25 years living and working in the United States that she really became impassioned to help.

Living in Florida, she said, “I decided to look for ways to volunteer and continue my Zionism, and WIZO was a natural fit.”

Friedman started by volunteering with her local chapter and slowly and surely, she went up the ranks in the organization until she became chairperson of WIZO Florida and then vice president of WIZO USA. When she returned to Israel nine years ago, she was appointed as the lead fundraiser. And in 2020, she became chairperson.

“We always say that we are the best kept

secret,” Friedman said of WIZO. “We do not have too many resources to invest in PR. All of our money goes straight to the projects.”

She said that for the connection is “Zionism, feminism and activism.”

OVER THE COURSE of the coronavirus pandemic, WIZO and the Welfare Ministry have seen an 800% increase in women calling support hotlines due to violence. WIZO spearheaded the creation of one new emergency shelter together with the Welfare Ministry to take in these battered women, saving 150 women and 250 children, according to Friedman.

WIZO also established a hotline for violent men and has been involved in new legislation that would better protect women and their children from violent partners by requiring these men to go to therapy.

“We estimate that there are a million people in our country that are at risk of violence,” Friedman told the Post. “One in every three women experience sexual, physical, economic or emotional violence.”

“B,” a 33-year-old mother of four, is one of these victims.

She said that her husband was sporadically violent, would drink too much alcohol and was constantly shifting between jobs.

“I suffered physical, verbal, sexual and economic violence,” B said. “I always tried to pull him to treatments, to send him to addiction centers to help himself. He would go for a few sessions each time and then decide he did not want to continue, so I gave up.”

But it all came to a head one night when he entered his home in a drunken stupor and started hitting his two-year-old son. The man threw the child on the bed and stepped on him.

“He could have killed him,” B said. “The other children saw everything.”

After that, her husband tried to strangle her.

“I went to my family, who helped me a lot, and since then I have turned to the police and the rabbinate,” B said. “I stopped hiding.”

B got a divorce and entered a WIZO shelter, which she said “helped me to become empowered. I came out full of new tools and set out on a new path.”

“You are protected in the shelter and when you leave it is not easy because you realize that you were living in a real ‘greenhouse,’” B said. “The shelter helped me a lot to adapt to my new situation. We went through it all together.”

Added B: “It’s a leap into life.” ■

This article was written in cooperation with WIZO.