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KAYAN

Feminist Organization

Women Demand Mobility: Documenting Local Women's Experience in the Village of Maghar

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Documneting Local Women's Experience in the
Village of Maghar**

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History and Mission

Kayan, literally “being” in Arabic, is an organization established by Palestinian Israeli women. Founded in 1998, Kayan works to significantly improve the status of Palestinian Israeli women by changing the traditional role of women and girls, and promoting their social and economic empowerment.

Kayan’s volunteers and staff bring feminism to the Arab social agenda in order to improve the status of women and to provide a space for women to think, discuss, research and present new concepts and ideas about women. By addressing the gender inequality at the root of society and creating a dialogue about unique cultural patterns that perpetuate the oppression of women within Arab society in Israel, Kayan’s activities open the way for a process of broad social change.

A regional/national organization, devoted to women’s capacity building and development, Kayan is a voice for Palestinian-Israeli women, women who themselves represent a marginalized community. The organization’s activists and the communities worked within are diverse, from rural to urban, observant and non-observant, both young and old and coming from a variety of backgrounds.

Dedicated to building women’s leadership roles, striving for more active participation of women in every area of life, inside and outside their homes, Kayan is committed to achieving change for Palestinian Israeli women not only within Arab villages but within all sectors of Israeli society.

Abstract

Women Demand Mobility

Lack of mobility is a stark reality in hundreds of rural towns and villages in Israel, severely affecting Arab women. For Arab women in the rural setting, even the simplest everyday movement from place to place, with children, from home to market, to doctor or clinic, nursery or school, can be prohibitive due to lack of infrastructure and due to social constraints. Access to essential health, education, civil and employment services are restricted by the lack of mobility.

The Women Demand Mobility project initiated by Kayan started in the village of Maghar—by women who were fed up trying to find a way to get to a weekly Kayan meeting, since there was no public transport within the community (20,000 pop.). The local women decided to address this issue and after organizing for one year, on January 2005, they celebrated the initiation of a bus service in Maghar.

The Kayan project helped build women leaders and the capacity to work together as a group. It provided skills to maintain a viable women's group that was action oriented.

The report describes the village, the women participants, and the project implementation. It shows how and why the group made a strategic decision to implement a bus service.

The report explains the impact on the women, on the community, and as a national development issue in Israel for Arabs living in rural areas. It details Kayan's work on Mobility from a Gender Perspective. The paper concludes that Arab women's need for mobility is a "non-issue" and must be taken from a community development standpoint in order to be achieved.

The Mobility Project in Maghar: Translating Needs into Rights

In 2003, a group of women in the Arab village of Maghar,¹ who were participating in one of Kayan's community empowerment workshops, identified the lack of public transportation in their village as a problem. It was a problem because there was no internal public transportation in the village and low-frequency public transportation between the village and the adjacent Arab villages and cities. In order to run their errands, visit their friends and relatives and receive services they had to walk long distances under the hot summer sun or in cold and rainy weather in the winter. As a result, many women living in Arab villages and cities were isolated and dependent on male relatives for mobility.

In a conference sponsored by Kayan in Maghar in 2006, women shared that most Arab families have only one car, which the main breadwinners, the men, use to go to their places of work. In the Arab society it is easier for men to obtain a driver's licenses, to own a car, and to have more freedom of movement.

Women spoke of being unable to go to important physician's appointments, of the hardships of walking long distances with young children and while pregnant, of their inability to walk due to health problems, and of their lack of privacy in their having to depend on the men in their lives for every big and small errand such as mailing a letter or dealing with banking needs. Many were unable to visit sick relatives during the day, even if they lived in the same village. Young women spoke of the great difficulties and inconveniences they encountered in getting to and from their universities and colleges. Moreover,

1 Maghar is an Arab village of 19,300 residents at the end of 2007, according to the ICBS.

many women pointed to their inability to be employed any distance away from home due to the lack of ability to get to and from their job, even if their employment place was inside the village.

Considering this lack of adequate public transportation it is not surprising that only 18 percent of Arab women are in the labor force, as opposed to 56 percent of Jewish women.² One way to increase Arab women's participation in the labor force is for the government to establish industrial and commercial areas near Arab settlements because employment opportunities in the Arab villages and cities are limited. However, it is also important to improve public transportation within the Arab settlements as well as between them and the surrounding areas where employment could be found.³

The idea of bringing public transportation to the village was a local initiative of the Maghar women. Kayan, accompanied the project through personal empowerment groups and community organizing and coordination. However, the idea, the planning, and the actual implementation were all the creation of the local women group. The women were highly motivated and they succeeded in implementing the project despite the various bureaucratic hurdles placed by their local council. An internal bus line ran in Maghar for eight months before it stopped due to technical problems. Mainly, the local authority did not place bus stops as was required by the Ministry of Transportation and was not morally and financially supportive of the project.

Nevertheless, the women did not give up. Kayan continued to accompany and support the women and connected them with

2 Lotan, O. (2007, January 22). Ta'sukat nashim bemigzar ha'aravi-rikuz nitunim. Mugash leva'ada lekidum m'amad ha'isha. Women and Employment in the Arab Sector. Presented to the Knesset Committee for the Advancement of Women. Knesset: Center for Research and Information.

3 Ben Yehuda E. & Cohen, O. (2007, August 3). Closing the Boardroom Gap. *Ha'aretz*.

a transportation consultant who emphasized the importance of local authority follow-up. Indeed the local authority in Maghar was partially supportive of the women when they first started. One of the organizers shared her experience:

The mayor told the women that even the men could not do the project, implying that it was a big project.

Since the women needed the support of the local authority in order to ensure that public transportation is provided in Maghar they had to deal with the local authority very diplomatically. They had many meetings with the local council and they lacked experience but they are also determined to have their bus line:

If the local council does not support this then we, in the long run, may go straight to the Knesset or to the Ministry of Transportation. Why should we be running around? The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first steps. We have never stopped working in the committee. We have new activities and we will return the bus line.⁴

In the end of 2006, the women of Maghar were again working with the Ministry of Transportation and their local council to overcome the various hurdles, such as the placement of bus stops, and to return the bus service. Their local initiative was a pilot project for other villages and by 2007 women in several other Arab villages and cities began working on similar initiatives and learning from the mistakes of the women in Maghar. Kayan, continues to accompany and empower the women involved in these various projects and there are hopes that what has become known as "The Mobility Project" will be taken up by women in all Arab locales in Israel.

4 Interview, February 19, 2007.

Thus, while women initiated the transportation project in Maghar, the project has wider implications for social change. There is a connection between transportation and the level of education and ability to work which leads to a higher economic situation. According to a Kayan representative, transportation is a human right because it gives freedom of movement.

The Mobility Project in Maghar: A Community Empowerment Project with Women

Empowerment Work with Women in Arab Villages and Towns

Since 1998, the Kayan organization has implemented programs that improve the quality of life of women throughout Israel by providing a space where Palestinian Israeli women can be personally empowered. This group work has been successfully carried out by trained and skilled activists, in dozens of communities, reaching hundreds of women every year.

The capacity building with small groups of women enables each participant to reach beyond the realm of the personal, the home, and the family, to a place where she is able to confidently play an active role in shaping her own life as well as creating change within the larger community.

The Beginning

The village of Maghar is located in the lower Galilee and has 20,000 inhabitants. Located on a steep hill it is spread out over a very large geographic area. By car it takes half an hour to travel from one end to the other.

At the initiative of the Maghar Welfare Department of the local authority, Kayan was asked to lead an empowerment group with 15 women, in order to help these women, by providing them with information and resources that could directly impact their daily lives.

This small group of women underwent a Kayan personal empowerment course lasting three months during 1999—2000. For 2 years following the successful completion of the first course, the women were adamant about their need for a

second course. They repeatedly asked the Welfare Department to organize a course that would give them the skills to become community activists and in 2002 the Welfare Department contracted with Kayan to open a second course.

In early 2003, Tagreed Alahmad, Kayan's Community Empowerment coordinator and group facilitator opened a second course with 15 women called 'Community Organizing'. Sada Asakle of the Welfare Department helped to set up the course as the Coordinator for local women's projects within the village. She played a key role throughout the entire process of empowerment for the women in the village. Most of the women who participated were graduates of the course in 2000, with a few newcomers. The course took place from December 2002 through August 2003, over a period of 7 months, with 2–3 meetings each month for a total of 19, 2-hour sessions.

Women Participants

The women in the group were for the most part quite close to one another, and became closer through the course. The majority of women were married, though some were widows and one was single and they ranged in age from 35–55 years old. None of the women had a driver's license.

The women were mainly housewives, with large families, and some also worked in seasonal agricultural labor, mainly apple picking. Two of the women run small businesses. They all have grammar school education, most completed 7–8 years of school, and one is now completing her baccalaureate, as a result of the influence of the course.

The Course

It was agreed upon by both the participants and the facilitator that the role of facilitator would be to serve as a catalyst for the group but not to act as the groups leader. It was understood that there would be a shared responsibility for the courses

success or failure, regarding participation and topics, as well as timeframe and overall commitment. The group engaged in workshops that assessed community needs, work, intervention and strategies for the group, and only then returned to Kayan to meet with staff and learn about how the NGO works and the role of Kayan.

The first module focused on identifying a project. The women undertook a mini-survey of pressing needs not currently being delivered by the local authorities. The questionnaire was developed by the women, and small groups of women went to the local education, school, welfare, health and community departments, and they interviewed local citizens in order for them to evaluate what the most acute need of the entire community was.

They had two distinct goals, the simpler one was to collect data, but the second goal was to be seen by the larger community as 'community activists' so that they themselves could bring about change and provide assistance to children, the disabled and the elderly.

After assessing the process of the field work, the next phase was to take all of the information gleaned from the interviews and questionnaires and determine what the community members felt were the most neglected needs of the community.

The group underwent a process of examining three areas related to possible projects: Does it meet the needs of the community, does the group have the resources and capacity to implement this project, and is the project realistic? After answering these questions, they concluded that their focus would be on a local Transportation Project.

The fact that they themselves had difficulties finding transportation to the very meetings validated the significance of their project and gave them the conviction that they had focused on the most urgent issue. After wondering before

each meeting, “How will I get to the course, to the meeting? Who will drive me? Will I wait for my husband, son, father, brother to come home and take me? Will I get there on time? They knew that success with this project would improve the quality of their own lives as well as all the members of the community.

Once they decided that Bus Transportation would be their project they participated in workshops that outlined the stages of project implementation. They examined possible obstacles, how to deal with them, and decided on separate roles for each of the women in the group. After that they continued looking towards the implementation stage. They drafted a short letter to the head of the mayor of the local authority presenting their idea, asking to meet him. (This was in June 2003, 6 months after beginning the course.)

In order to prepare for a meeting where the women would meet directly with the governing authority and persuade the local authority to take a course of action, something that would have been unthinkable six months prior, Kayan facilitated a workshop with the women in order to prepare for this key event. During the workshop the women determined who would attend and represent the group, what key points would be discussed and what persuasive arguments would be made. Soon after, the meeting took place with the mayor and with the local head of the Welfare Department.

The Bus-Line Project and its Implementation

The Mobility project was ultimately chosen because it tangibly met the needs of the women themselves, as well as being highly beneficial to all members of the community. In addition, in line with the resources of the women and the group, it was pragmatic and doable.

Resources

There were four relevant bodies involved in this project. They were: 1) the women’s group 2) Kayan (as an organization and its staff, 3) the local authority and its Welfare Department and 4) the Al Affifi private bus service.

From December 2004 through February 2005, the most intensive period of work took place. During this period, Kayan met with the women several times a month, while they were in the most intensive stages of project marketing, community outreach and PR. Part of the sessions focused on team work and cooperation between the four separate bodies involved, in order to achieve the intended results. The second area of focus was on project implementation, and addressed everything related to the bus service, its schedule, route and commitment.

Project Implementation

The implementation included several assignments that were distributed among the women. These included surveying citizens to discover their needs in relation to the proposed mini-bus—suggested times, locations for stops, and the route. It also included meetings with the bus company and the local authority. Lastly, it included publicizing the final bus schedule and its route to as many inhabitants of the village as possible.

In order to do this, the women took it upon themselves to advertise the bus route in a marketing and public awareness campaign using media outlets including, local television, a local weekly newspaper and the national Arabic radio.

The four bodies reached an official agreement that the service would start on January 15th, and after running for 2 weeks, a community-wide event would be held to honor this accomplishment.

In addition, the women continuously engaged in discussion with local community departments, held several parlor sessions in three neighborhoods, and held a large public event

in the community center on January 29th which drew over 130 participants in order to officially inaugurate the start of the service.

At this event the local authority stated publicly that they would install bus signs and they would help with the public awareness campaign. At this same time, the bus company promised to fully cooperate and to continue to provide the bus service on a regular daily basis.

Unfortunately, as we will see later, several key agreements and promises were not kept. In reviewing the conversations the women had with the bus drivers, it became clear that the drivers thought they could determine the schedules themselves without accountability to the community. The drivers had the impression that the women's bus was something marginal, not serious, a nice idea but one that did not have to be carried out. This was not what had been contracted and did not meet the agreement to provide a consistent, dependable, marked and publicized bus route. This lack of dependability and confusion caused distrust among the citizens, and also created a real breakdown of confidence between the Mrar women's group and the two bodies that failed to meet their agreement.

It is important to note that the inaugural event on January 29th drew much local, regional, national and even international support and attention. The discrepancy between what was publicly agreed upon and what was delivered was extreme and disheartening to the women, but this public support also galvanized the women to continue pursuing a functional bus transport system.

Follow-Up and Maintaining Bus Service

Since the group had become a significant presence in the community, people constantly asked them why the bus didn't come today, why it didn't stop at a particular point, and this became exhausting. The local citizens concluded it wasn't a

serious service, and by the fall, the group itself lost motivation and became increasingly disappointed.

During the 3 months, from August—October, there was more pressure upon the bus company and the buses did become more regular resulting in more bus passengers. However, the local authority failed to post signs, the costs of gas had gone up, the bus company felt there weren't enough travelers, and they decided bi-laterally to stop running the bus service altogether.

After this decision the women's group did not give up but instigated a public rebuke of the decision with an article in the local paper, where they pointed a finger at the local authority's failure to designate bus stops, and the drivers failure to implement the route and stops as promised. In the article they openly requested a meeting with the head of the local authority.

During the last week of October, after the mini-bus line was stopped, a letter that was initiated by 2 men in the village, garnering an additional 15 male signatories, was sent that outlined the need for the line and asked that it be reinstated immediately.

Pilot Project—To Raise Awareness and Bring it to the Public Agenda

At the time the women first identified the Mobility project as their focus and decided to undertake a community-wide organizing effort to improve the transportation service, Kayan also decided that this would be a "Pilot Project". This meant that Kayan recognized that the needs of this village were not unique, but rather the lack of mobility is a broad-spread phenomenae that affects hundreds of thousands of Arab citizens. To provide public transportation to every village and town in the country is beyond the scope of Kayan and lies in the responsibility of two bodies, that of the local and national government. However, Kayan can organize groups of women

and provide a specific time-limited response to a lack of public service by helping to highlight and address human needs.

Kayan realized it would use this project as a jumping off board for raising the issue to a more widespread general public debate. Kayan is using this successful experience as an EXAMPLE par excellence, of what can be done in rural settings, working with local women's associations in other locales, encouraging them to use the example of Maghar to demand that the authorities implement bus services in other villages where the same problem exists.

Mobility from a Gender Perspective

There are many points to assess when considering the issue of transportation from a gender perspective. Firstly, city planning is predominantly carried out by men and often reflects their perception of what community needs are, not always considering the needs of women and children. The Arab community in Israel suffers from severe discrimination, marginalization and a real lack of government funding for human needs and infrastructures.

In the Arab sector those most affected by inadequate transportation are women. Usually it is women who do not have licenses and women who do not own cars. They are fulltime homemakers, shouldering all of the responsibilities of childcare and attention to the elderly and the ill. However, they are frequently unable to meet these responsibilities because they are totally dependent on men to take them to services, health examinations, social service appointments or schools. They also cannot find employment, education or training, since without dependable, safe transport they are restricted to staying at home.