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Female Workers in Beauty Salons and Male Workers in Barbershops A Case Study from a Gender Perspective

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Abstract

This case study examines the work conditions and circumstances of female workers in beauty salons as compared to those of male workers in barber shops in four governorates in the West Bank (Ramallah, Tulkarm, Nablus, Bethlehem), and the Gaza Strip. The case study also addresses the right of female and male workers to join and form trade unions, and their knowledge related to this topic. The research was conducted during a period of two months, in December 2016 and January 2017. Through this case study, we also seek to shed light on the situation of unions for beauty salons and barbershops, work conditions and circumstances, and the pros and cons of working in this sector as addressed by the workers themselves. The findings of the questionnaires, conclusions and recommendations were analyzed based on a gender perspective.

Methodology of the case study:

The methodology of the case study was based on qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data was gathered through a questionnaire filled by 49 respondents, 20 of them are male barbers and 28 female beauty salon workers women. The questionnaire surveyed workers' opinions regarding the work and effectiveness of trade unions in defending workers' rights, the extent to which they have the freedom to join and establish a trade union, the commitment of employers to basic rights guaranteed by the labor law and paying the minimum wage. A qualitative approach, using focus groups and interviews, was also adopted to study the work environment of female and male workers in beauty salons and barbershops; in specific, to describe the similarities and differences of work circumstances between male and female workers in the mentioned governorates in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Case study limitations:

While this case study aims to establish a basis for more in-depth and comprehensive research on the above mentioned sector, it faced the following limitations:

- The scarcity of former studies and research on this subject
- The limited number of questionnaires that were distributed and collected According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics data for 2012, the size of the study group, i.e. workers in the sector, is about 9,412 persons for both sexes. Thus, it would have been preferable to have a sample of no less than a 100 respondents. Due to the homogeneity of the study group and their working circumstances, only 49 questionnaires were filled.
- Some workers were reluctant to participate in answering the questionnaires or in the focus group, because of job security issues.
- Most male workers in barbershops actually own their shops, and it was difficult to find non-owners, whereas wage work is more widespread among female workers in beauty salons

Findings of the case study:

The findings were comparable regardless of the method used to gather information. Workers in beauty salons, hairdressers and barbershops are marginalized in terms of their economic status, their ability to exercise their right to organize, and the extent to which they obtain their rights as per labor legislation (in terms of wages and compensations, leaves, equal pay, and working in a

healthy and protected workplace).

Whereas there is a union for the owners of beauty salons, male and female workers in beauty salons and barber shops had no union to protect their rights at the time the case study data was gathered¹. In fact, it appeared that some female workers in the West Bank are affiliated to the union for beauty salons owners and paid membership fees. At the same time, the vast majority of female and male respondents to the questionnaire were of the opinion that they are not free to organize and that trade unions are not active in defending their rights.

Thus, the thriving beauty sector requires more attention to prevent violations of beauty salon workers' rights, since as per the study group neither the Ministry of Health (MOH) nor the Ministry of Labor conduct inspections regarding health conditions or compliance of beauty salons and barbershops with the Palestinian labor law.

The majority of male and female workers in the beauty sector are well qualified professionally and educationally. Women workers are more educated than male workers, but it appears that experience rather than level of education constitutes a determining factor in their sector.

Although the Palestinian labor law guarantees basic labor rights to workers in the beauty salons sector, they are facing poor work conditions and circumstances in terms of wages, unpaid leaves especially in winter, long working hours, and the exploitation of female workers under the so-called "training periods" during which they are required to work for free. These trainings periods can extend up to six months in some beauty salons. In terms of occupational health and safety, 57% of women workers and 50% of male workers indicated that they use protective tools in their work. This still leaves a high percentage of workers who have no protection from risks at work. At the same time, the percentage of workers that undergo preliminary and regular medical examinations was very low.

In spite of variables of gender, age, education, work experience, marital status, and place of residence or job, it was noted that there were no significant differences in the answers of the surveyed respondents. This is an indication that poor work circumstances are experienced by most of the employees.

Male workers have a slightly better situation than female workers, although they also face many violations of basic rights guaranteed by the labor law. A percentage of 82.6% of female workers are paid less than the minimum wage, which is NIS 1450, in comparison to 61.1% of male workers, which means that men receive better wages than women. At the same time, the services that women workers provide in beauty salons fetch a much higher price than similar services provided by male workers in barbershops.

In conclusion, there are many violations of the law affecting female workers in beauty salons, including lack of abidance with paying the minimum wage, undefined working hours, lack of abidance with the weekly day of rest, probation period that exceeds 3 months and non-provision of occupational safety and health requirements. Women work long hours without adequate compensation; if men work long hours, they draw direct benefits as they are associated to the owner or get a share of earnings. Women's wage are lower than men's wages, although they are more educated. Workers lack their own representative bodies.

¹ In February 2017, female hairdressers and beauty salon workers held the establishing conference for a trade unions representing them in the Gaza Strip

As noticed by the answers of workers at beauty salons of both sexes, there is an obvious lack of implementation of the labor law, high competition between beauty salons, and high rate of exploitation of the workers' need for employment, which results in violations of their rights, in particular in the beauty salons employing women. Due to the previously mentioned reasons, the work circumstances of both male and female workers creates a situation that can be qualified as unprotected work.

The study recommendations include, but are not limited to, the following:

Governmental duty-bearers:

In light of the situation described in the case study, the Ministry of Labor should reinforce its monitoring of employers' abidance with the law and specifically target the beauty salons sector in its inspection campaigns. It should provide guidance to employers to ensure that occupational safety and health regulations are fully respected, and all workers in the sector enjoy safe and healthy work conditions. The Ministry of Labor, in collaboration with all concerned actors, should work on developing vocational training for hairdressers, beauty salon workers and barbers, and ensure that certificates given at the completion of the vocational training are officially recognized.

The Palestinian government should strive to fulfill its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and adopt policies that effectively combat discriminatory practices that affect women's rights at work, in particular with regard to the wage gap between men and women.

Employers:

Employers should respect all dispositions of the Palestinian labor law; in particular, they should pay no less than the minimum wage to female workers, provide them with paid leaves, employ them solely in the tasks corresponding to their job description, ensure that all workers use protective tools and equipment against risks at work, provide female workers with maternity leaves as enacted by the law, and provide insurance against work injuries and undertake medical examinations for workers.

Wage levels should reflect workers' experience, and pay raises provided proportionally to its increase

The union for owners of beauty salons should ensure that its membership includes only owners of beauty salons.

Civil society organizations:

Civil society organization, alongside with the efforts of the NGOs, particularly human rights organizations, and trade unions can play a significant role in fostering better protection for beauty salon workers' rights. First of all, these organizations should activate their roles in advocating for the rights of beauty salon workers and working toward forming a trade union for them. These organizations should also increase the number of the awareness meetings, workshops, and trainings for beauty salon female and male workers in order to build their capacities and raise their knowledge of their fundamental rights and how to defend them. There should be coordination, collaboration and networking among NGOs, human rights organizations, international organizations and trade unions to share experiences and resources, and improve the situation of workers in Palestine.

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