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“Maid” in Israel? The impossible Obstacles Young Mothers At-Risk Face

In the first 15 minutes of the Netflix hit series, one can understand the reality of these mothers. In Israel, hundreds of such mothers are offered partial solutions which don't allow them to envision a future.

Written by Abigail Hazor-Sivan

One morning this week, I got a call I was waiting for. One that confirms T.'s admission to the only shelter in the country that offers five beds for pregnant young women. T., a lovely 19-year-old woman, grew up at a boarding school and was educated at the special education system. She is pregnant for the first time (her partner is in prison). We found her thanks to her former school principal, who kept in touch with her after graduation and searched for a solution for her.

We have been working with her for a while, as part of a unique initiative for young mothers at-risk who lack family backing and support. Together, we are trying to manage rental debt, the fact that her family and home aren't a safe, and her love for a partner who is not physically violent, but is verbally and financially abusive. T.'s job requires physical effort, which she will soon be unable to perform. In the last two weeks, she has fallen twice while on duty. The employer has not yet been informed about her pregnancy. In this situation, despite her dreams of independence, hopes for her own home, and her fierce desire to face everything on her own, being part of a program is the best option for her.

Giving birth to children is both the simplest and the most complex task

At this point, I am usually asked - "So why is she not terminating the pregnancy?" It is difficult to explain that being pregnant and bringing life into the world is a sign of belonging and social normalcy in Israeli society. It is difficult to explain the deep desire for a sort of redo, the hope for an anchor that will make it possible to muster the strength and give you something to fight for, the love and the wish to build a life with a partner, even if he is not a suitable one. The gender roles make it almost exclusively a women's responsibility to prevent pregnancy, and later raise children. The body that is injured and hurt, has gone through countless traumas, yet manages to grow a life, and prove to oneself that it is valuable and good.

Bringing children into the world is both the simplest, and the most complex task. But when you're a young woman at-risk, suffering from distress, trauma, and lack of support, it also requires constant justification and defense against society's judgments, at every turn, in a way which makes it very difficult to ask for, and receive help.

Falling through the cracks

In the first 15 minutes of the hit *Netflix* series - *Maid*, we witness this reality in full force. The impossible obstacles that leave these young women isolated exacerbate their situation, and

then challenge their right to motherhood and their ability to be good caretakers. In Israel, hundreds of young mothers are at risk, and in distress. It is difficult to obtain an exact number, since there is no official recognition of the phenomenon. I have searched through countless sources.

In Israel of 2021, these young women fall between the cracks. Despite the widespread recognition (thankfully, there has been a change in recent years, with the launch of the Ministry of Welfare's National Program for young men and women at-risk) of the needs, and unique specialization in working with at-risk youth, as well as decent recognition in the needs of young at-risk parents (through countless targeted programs), these women are left behind.

They are not entitled to the services provided to at-risk youth, as a result of their status as being parents or married. Often, they fail to integrate into existing aid programs, do not meet the criteria, or are afraid to ask for help for fear that their children will be taken away. This fear often exacerbates their situation once their 3-year-old children, by Israel's mandatory education law, enter the education system and sometimes are already dealing with developmental delays. This forces the system to "correct" and intervene.

Often, even the few social rights the young mothers are entitled to, constitute a trap which makes it impossible for them to realize the potential and hope that come with choosing to become a parent. The income security they receive until the child turns two years old depends on the young woman's status as a single parent, which leads to survival attempts, and problem-solving that sometimes brings about even more problems.

"Only when my child was born I was able to envision a future."

Alex's story, one of a maid, illustrates well this impossible mechanism of immediate, partial solutions that exacerbate and deepen problems in the long run. Some young women do not officially establish the status of the relationship with their children's fathers. They do not register the child under the father's name, all to be recognized as single mothers. This puts them in a cycle of hiding, minimizes the legitimacy of the fatherhood, and prevents the father from playing a significant role in the child's life.

Regarding employment, the young mothers' social benefits limit the number of hours they can work. If they go over a certain income threshold, their allowance decreases, which may sometimes even lead to debts. Choosing employment over their only secure income is difficult sometimes; it simply does not make financial sense, and it leaves no room to seize opportunities, and fulfill a young woman's desire for rehabilitation and development.

I want to make it clear that I do not oppose the welfare allowance system in any way. Still, I believe we should consider expanding it, so that it will financially incentivize integration into employment and education, and enable escape from a life of poverty and exclusion. These young mothers are usually second and third generations of poverty, exclusion, and distress, facing impossible integration barriers. For this purpose, ELEM has established a National Program for Young Mothers At-Risk, which strives to promote recognition, response, and a policy change for mothers, fathers, and their children. ELEM's staff works with young mothers nationwide. We are with them during their most difficult times, offer coffee, and a moment for themselves, and the opportunity to imagine and believe that things can change. We inform them about, and help them gain access to existing services. We work on developing solutions for lacking services, change policies, and the world.

Young mothers need us to believe in the hope that comes with their choice of becoming mothers. We will work with them quickly and efficiently, in partnership with the state, to end the cycle of intergenerational poverty and trauma. We owe it to them and their children. As one of them told me - "Only when my child was born, I was able to dream and envision a future." They deserve our help in fulfilling and developing their dreams, and not shatter these dreams with the painful reality of life in poverty, exclusion, and risk in Israel.