

Women are flocking to Na'amat's new Women's Rights Centers, which help them deal with issues of single-parenting, domestic violence, employment, marriage, divorce and aging.

by RUTH SELIGMAN

THE RIGHT

Three thousand women — that's an impressive figure. It represents the number of women who visited the Ida Temkin Women's Rights Center this year. The branch of Na'amat president Hedva Almog, this newest star in Na'amat's Tel Aviv-Jaffa firmament was officially dedicated in November 1999 during the NA'AMAT USA convention. A similar facility has been operating for some time now in Haifa but on a much smaller scale, while a large one, modeled after the center in Tel Aviv, has just opened in Jerusalem. Almog's vision is to have about 20 women's rights centers throughout Israel.

What are these centers? For the answers to this and other questions, I talked at length with Hannah Ben-David, elected chair of Na'amat Tel Aviv-Jaffa, and Edith Tytunovich, director of the Center. Both women pointed out that these centers are being established in response to the changes taking place in Israeli society, as well as in Na'amat itself. These changes include a rising divorce rate, with one out of every three marriages in Israel today terminating in divorce; an increase in the number of single-parent families; a growing awareness regarding domestic violence and child abuse, with a concomitant increase in the number of cases being

reported; and a rapidly aging population, with many middle-aged women, the "sandwich generation," trying to juggle their own needs along with caring for their aging parents.

"Family structures are changing," says Ben-David. "There are more working mothers, more single mothers, more broken homes, more dysfunctional families and more older women alone on their own. These changes are bringing in their wake conflicts and crises that are forcing

us to reassess and refocus our programming. We need to reach out to more women and to specific groups within that population." To achieve this, the Center now encompasses the work of Na'amat's Legal Aid Department, but has broadened and expanded the activities of that department to include "family aid." This new component includes counseling for families with domestic problems, which, if left unresolved, can lead to irreconcilable differences.

To illustrate the type of conflicts dealt with at the center, Tytunovich, an attorney specializing in family law, tells of a recent case. A couple were both secular when married, but during the course of their marriage, the husband became increasingly more observant. His wife didn't share his adherence to ritual and observance. Problems and disputes arose regarding the education of their children, observance of the Sabbath and the keeping of a kosher kitchen. Alone, this couple might not have been able to work out the compromises necessary to maintain a stable family structure. With counseling, they were able to talk out and resolve their differences, to achieve a lifestyle of compromise in which the needs and demands of each side were respected and understood. As Tytunovich says, "The potential breakup of a family was nipped in the bud."

Counseling at the Center is made possible by the outstanding volunteer efforts of two psychologists and three social workers,"

Lawyer Edith Tytunovich, director of Na'amat's Women's Center in Tel Aviv.



Photos by Rivka Frieber

TO BE EQUAL



Hannah Ben-David,
director of Na'amat
Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

reports Ben-David proudly. "They give freely and unstintingly of their time and expertise, adding an important new dimension to our work."

"Many times our lawyers will refer their clients to the counselors, and vice-versa," says Tytunovich. "Basically, we are running a team operation, as the following case illustrates. A older couple came to the Center distraught and unhappy. Both had been married previously, and both had children by their former spouses.

other members of the family. Frequently, the first encounter is with one member of the family, usually the wife, mother or mother-in-law, followed by meetings held together with other members of the family. Without counseling, disputes can escalate into unpleasant and even destructive situations."

"Of course, we are continuing to work with women who are victims of domestic abuse," emphasizes Tytunovich, "cooperating with Na'amat's Glickman Center for the Prevention of Violence in the Family in Tel Aviv. For many abused women, our Temkin Center is often their

Tytunovich.

"Today, for example, with the high divorce rate, coupled with the fact that people are living longer, with women usually outliving their spouses, we are seeing an increasing number of women who are helpless when it comes to dealing with the financial aspects of their lives. Accustomed to their husbands handling all money matters, now alone, they have difficulty adjusting to a new situation, with which they have little or no experi-

There are more working mothers, more single mothers, more broken homes, more dysfunctional families and more older women living alone – Na'amat needs to reach out to them.

These adult children, on both sides, were disturbed by their parents' desire to live together. The children were afraid they would be disinherited. Directed to one of our counselors, the couple met with her, first alone and then with their children. After assuaging the fears of the children, the counselor referred the couple to one of our lawyers at the Center who helped them write and sign a legally binding agreement that spelled out the rights and privileges each had to the other and to their respective children, along with a will that similarly satisfied everyone."

"In much of our counseling work," explains Ben-David, "we are helping the members of a family learn how to talk with each other, how to communicate rationally and calmly. Domestic crises may include problems with in-laws or with

first address." Adds Ben-David: "Initially, these women may see a counselor who often has to help them overcome their denial that they are being battered and abused."

"Essentially, however, it is our lawyers who help these women, presenting them with various options," says Tytunovich. "This includes advice on how to legally effect the expulsion of the violent husband from their home, which," she admits, "is a drastic, but often necessary step. And of course, we may also refer them to a shelter, such as the one at the Glickman Center."

In its new area of family aid, the Ida Temkin Center has branched out to include financial counseling. "This is another project that we've undertaken as a result of societal changes," says

ence, and in which they are liable to fall victim to unscrupulous advice. At workshops, lectures and in individual counseling sessions, we help them to become more financially savvy — how to set up a budget, learn to live within it and, equally important, how to prioritize their needs, both in the short- and long-term. In essence, we are giving them the tools for acquiring the sense of self-confidence that will give them a better quality of life."

"And it is not only widows and divorcees who need this financial counseling," notes Ben-David. "At our workshops and lectures, we are also reaching out to other women who, whether married or not, haven't a clue when it comes to dealing with money. We help them learn how to handle various types of financial situations, to become equal partners in manag-

ing their family's financial resources, and in making the decisions which affect their lives in so many ways."

New also is the project called "aid for the sandwich generation," those middle-aged women caught between the demands made by their children, by the problems of husbands who are going through midlife or pre-retirement crises, by their commitment to their own careers, many now just really taking off, and by the demands made by their aging parents, who are living much longer than in previous generations.

To meet the needs of this specific group whose numbers are constantly increasing, the Center has initiated a three-prong approach. This includes open-door sessions — meetings held once a week for two hours where anyone can "just to walk in," says Tytunovich. At these informal sessions, women discuss the various solutions they have discovered, and, more importantly, feelings of resentment and guilt are brought into the open and shared.

Second on the agenda are closed groups of a small number of women who meet regularly for a specific number of weeks. "At both our open house sessions and at the closed ones, the main goal," explains Tytunovich, "is to help these women understand that it is legitimate to feel the way they do and to understand that their needs are also important.

"And the third prong to this project," she continues, "are joint sessions with the middle-aged women and their aging parents, again with an eye to helping all parties involved deal constructively with their feelings."

Not all the programming at the Center, however, is a new undertaking. Counseling and aid for single-parent families, over 90 percent of whom are women, have been services of Na'amat for many years. What's new, however, is the dimension of the problem. According to Tytunovich, in Tel Aviv, there has been a 60 percent increase in the last five years in the number of single-parent families, many of whom are immigrants from the former Soviet Union. For these women, the Center serves as a valuable source of information, advising them regarding their rights. These include subsidized fees



Edith Tytunovich works with volunteer Poulette Shohar.

at day care centers, reductions in property taxes, special payments by the National Insurance Institute (the Israeli equivalent of the American Social Security programs), especially to women who elect to stay at home with children under the age of seven and not go out to work, assistance with rental payments and preferred mortgages. Going even further, the Center provides information on various vocational training programs, enabling these single mothers to enter the labor market at a meaningful level. Individual counseling for these women is supplemented by workshops and group meetings in which single mothers can share their experiences, bond with each other and learn how to manage their lives better.

"Na'amat has a long history of helping single women," says Tytunovich, "but now we can offer even more sophisticated counseling due to our vast experience. And we have learned that in spite of the thread of commonality running through so many of their lives, each woman often has a special problem of her own." She cites the case of a woman who was having difficulty handling her ex-husband who was refusing to pay her child support, as ordered by the courts. "We gave her the tools with which to deal with him," she says simply.

New on the single-parent scene, however, is, as Tytunovich points out, "the increase in the number of unmarried women seeking to bear children. They come to our office with the prospective father to write and sign an agreement regarding the rights and privileges of each parent. These are couples who, for one reason or another, do not wish to marry or

even live together, but who are interested in the father being an active involved partner in the parent process."

If one were to zero in on one major focus at the Center, it would be variations on the verb "to agree." Much time and energy is devoted to helping people reach agreements, both in the legal and non-legal spheres.

"It is our legal aid assistance that constitutes the bulk of our work," explains Tytunovich. "Na'amat's legal aid is still concentrated in two areas: family law and labor law. Family law includes domestic abuse, prenuptial agreements, divorce proceedings, child support, visitation and custody, as well as issues connected with wills and inheritance. Labor law, dealing with questions related to the workplace, includes sexual harassment, discrimination regarding work conditions, agreements, firing and dismissal due to pregnancy and birth, as well as problems related to retirement and pensions.

"Here we see an interesting dichotomy," observes Tytunovich. "In the realm of labor legislation and the rights granted women in the work force, Israel is one of the most progressive countries in the Western industrialized world. This legislation goes back a long way starting with the Equal Rights Law passed in the early years of the State, which gives men and women equal standing before the law and on the Male and Female Workers' Equal Pay Law, the Equal Opportunity Law and the Equal Retirement Law, which allow women to retire at age 65, the same age as men. Equally impressive is the new legislation, recently passed, which defines sexual harassment in the widest possible terms.

"The problems in the area of labor law," stresses Tytunovich, "lie not in the legislation, but in the unfortunate reality that many of the equality laws have been far from fully enforced or implemented because the instruments of implementation are either insufficient or have yet to be properly tested in court."

Na'amat has an enviable record in helping women fight their legal battles, a well-deserved reputation that has led it to win some impressive landmark cases. One such case, recently resolved, involved a group of women from one of Israel's leading banks who had discovered that their pen-

sion agreement was unfair. When a man at their bank retired, his agreement stated that, upon his death, 60 percent of his pension went to his widow for the rest of her life.

In contrast, the women learned that upon their deaths, their surviving husbands would receive nothing; the pensions died with them. The women applied to the lawyers of the Center who helped them take their case to court. The bank stated that the women had signed a waiver agreeing to the terms of their pension

from another man while living apart from her husband are marked as *mamzerim*, according to Jewish law, who are forbidden to marry a Jew "for the next ten generations."

On the other hand, if a man whose wife refuses to consent to the divorce lives with an unmarried woman, their children will be not be stigmatized. Even more discriminatory, he is allowed to lead a normal life — as she isn't — to take a common-law wife who has almost all the

privileges and rights of a wife.

Faced with the growing number of divorces and aware of the potential problems that can arise in divorce proceedings, the Center is actively promoting agreements and approaches that can minimize the trauma of divorce and maximize the rights afforded women. One approach is the establishment of a mediation service, where in the presence of a neutral arbitrator, couples can work out an agreement delineating the distribution of their prop-

New on the single-parent scene are the increasing numbers of unmarried women planning to have children. They come to our office with the prospective fathers to draw up agreements regarding the rights of each parent.

plan. Na'amat claimed that this waiver was invalid since it is impossible to agree to a clause that is blatantly discriminatory, this one was, and contrary to the laws guaranteeing equality to women workers. "The court agreed with our position," reports Tytunovich, "and the verdict was in our favor, thus setting an important precedent for future cases of a similar nature.

"Where family law, however, is concerned," says Tytunovich, "the situation is different and more problematic. According to legislation passed in 1953 by the Knesset, all matters of personal status, such as marriage and divorce, are under the exclusive jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts, which operate according to *halacha* (traditional Jewish law). And there are discriminatory aspects to this law. Where divorce is concerned, for example, according to *halacha*, there is no divorce according to the discretion of the courts. A marriage is dissolved only when the husband agrees to give his wife a *get*, a Jewish divorce. She, of course, must also agree to accept it."

Although Jewish law requires that both the husband and wife must consent to the divorce, the husband's refusal has more serious consequences for the wife than her refusal has for him. Until she has her *get*, she may not live with another man, nor even marry. In addition, any children she may have



The center was named in memory of NA'AMAT USA member Ida Temkin. Emotionally abused by her husband for many years, her goal was to create places in Israel where battered women could get help and where women could work towards equality. Shown at the dedication of the center are Na'amat and city officials.



erty and the custody of their children. When this agreement is brought to the civil courts, if there is no opposition by either side, it is approved and the couple then go to the rabbinical court for the *get*. "The success of our mediation," says Tytunovich, "is an agreement which can bypass a long hassle and struggle in the rabbinical courts.

"We have also found," she continues, "that a prenuptial agreement is another wonderful tool for preventing many of the problems that may arise from a drawn-out divorce battle. In such an agreement, the couple agrees in advance, for example, how to distribute their property. From our experience, we know that these prenuptial agreements offer a potentially satisfactory solution for preventing a woman from becoming an *agunot* — trapped in a marriage because of a husband's refusal to give her a *get*, a refusal often based on his unwillingness to agree to a fair distribution of the property." These days, more and more couples are coming to the Center to sign these prenuptial agreements. "This is a direct result of our counseling efforts, encouraging couples to take this all-important step," notes Tytunovich.

The Center also helps troubled couples work out agreements for *shalom bayit*, loosely translated as "peace in the home." These agreements spell out the

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