

New Knesset Sub-C'tee Examines Discrimination Against Fathers

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(Israelnationalnews.com) A new Knesset subcommittee for fathers' rights in divorce and child-custody proceedings held its first meeting Monday.

The Subcommittee on the Family Crisis in Israel was presided over by its chairman, MK Chaim Amsalem (Shas). Committee member and initiator Avraham Ravitz (UTJ) delivered the opening statement which ignited a stormy clash between government representatives and rights groups.

"This committee is dealing with the life and death issues faced by thousands of children, mothers and fathers in Israel," MK Ravitz said. He expressed hopes that the committee will fix legislation that makes it too easy for false claims to be filed against divorced fathers resulting in their being cut off from visiting their children.

Dr. Orli Iness of the University of Haifa told the committee that "when the Knesset adopted legislation on the matter of protecting women from violence, it was reported that about 20 percent of complaints filed were false, but it adopted the legislation as the price to pay in order to protect the weak... Presently, there have been reports that in some precincts the figure [for false complaints] is as high as 50%. If that had been the case at the time, the Knesset would have thought differently about the matter."

Iness said that one of the main problems surrounding the issue is the lack of organized impartial studies on the phenomenon. "They should be carried out. It is not such a difficult task."

In the previous meeting of the Labor, Welfare and Health Committee, in which the subcommittee was conceived, a representative of the police force was present and asked to compile data on false complaints and the percentage of complainants found to be lying who were charged for it. At the time, the representative reported there were just 13 investigations into false claims in all of 2005.

The Welfare Ministry representative at the committee meeting faced sharp criticism that her office had failed to hand over data on the phenomenon. "Making us the enemy of the nation does not help anyone," she said defensively, promising the Ministry would hand over all the information and files needed for a comprehensive study.

Moshe Aberjil, who heads one of the fathers' rights groups present at the meeting, complained that the Welfare Ministry's forms are all worded with gender inflections that are only suitable for complaints of violence carried out by men, when it has been clearly shown that female domestic violence is a reality. Other representatives alleged that police do not follow up on complaints filed by men, indicating an order from above not to pursue such investigations.

Rivkah Alkobi of the State Prosecution, was greeted with disappointment when she said that her office lacks any empirical statistical information on the matter. "The reason many cases are closed is 'lack of public interest' or the 'preservation of the family,'" she explained. She conceded that it was very rare to see those found to have filed false complaints prosecuted.

Dr. Michael Kronghaus of the Israeli Center for the Defense of the Child drew fire when he compared the fact that 15,000 children in Israel are unable to see their fathers to the Yemenite Children's Affair. "This is a repeat of the stealing of the Yemenite children under the protection of Israel's legal system," Dr. Kronghaus lamented. The allegations that the Labor-run government of Israel lied to Yemenite immigrants about the death of their children in the 50s and put them up for adoption or worse remain an emotional and under-researched area of Israeli history.

Dr. Kronghaus added that only 2.3 percent of divorced men in Israel have custody of their children, whereas in France and Germany the figure is around 20 percent and in the US 35 percent. "Are Jewish fathers so much worse?" he asked.

Tzippy Nachshon, who is in charge of the family violence issue in the governmental welfare service, took issue with the Yemenite children comparison and said that 11 percent of Israeli women suffer family violence. "750 women have to leave their homes each year and enter shelters, which is not simple and 14 women are murdered by their husbands each year."

Nachshon's statistics drew objections from several sides. "What about the 300 men who commit suicide each year because they have their kids taken away from them," yelled Yaakov Ben Issachar of Our Children's Future. He said that the figure of 14 women murdered, while tragic, is no excuse for the persecution of thousands of innocent fathers and the perception that all male divorcees are potential murderers.

Gil Ronen of the Familistim organization tried to calm the tempers, calling for those present to rise above the gender politics of the issue to truly deal with the growing crisis. "Men and women are meant to be together, to raise children and grandchildren and not to sit in subcommittees divided like in a schoolyard spat." Addressing the various statistics cited by those at the meeting, Ronen warned: "Statistics are a powerful tool. They can kill when used incorrectly." He examined one of the only studies on the matter published in Israel, taking issue with its title, Violence Against Women, Children and Youth. "So who is perpetrating the violence outlined in this study? Men, apparently." He said the study was flawed in that it only interviewed women and the study's author repeatedly changed his numbers "dropping 90,000 battered women from his figure just a few weeks after it was published."

"The problem is that in Israel these statistics are all created by an establishment that is fanatical, lead by MKs like Zehava Gal-On (Meretz) and Shelly Yachimovitch (Labor). A person who is fanatical in their views cannot stand at the head of an objective organization or study."

Ronen's statements were backed by Attorney Chagit Lev, who said that there is a "critical need for a study carried out by objective groups – and not by the Welfare Ministry." She dismissed claims by the Ministry representatives that many of the fathers cut off from their children had no desire to pursue the relationships. "I have grown men in my office on a regular basis, crying like babies for me to help them be able to see their children. I am not sitting here today for the sake of the men or the women, though, but for the children themselves... Pretending that domestic violence is only a male issue leaves thousands of children in the care of violent women – and 80 percent of kids raised with parental violence go on to use violence against their own kids."

Another lawyer, Ariel Levine, said the heart of the legislative defect enabling the crisis is the ease with which a woman, on her own or counseled by a lawyer to do so to help her case, can walk into a police station and receive a 10-day restraining order against a father without any surcharge or bond posted. "Then, the judges will often leave it in place without any proof because nobody wants to later be known as the judge who let the potential murderer go. The result is a huge number of men, good fathers, upstanding citizens that fall victim to this system."

Questioned by MK Amsalem, Levine lamented: "Unfortunately, this has become a political matter much more than one of justice. There is a radically feminist media that is interested in presenting the woman as the perpetual victim."

MK Amsalem concluded the meeting with a sharp critique against the Israel Police for failing to send a representative to the committee. "The absence of the police today obstructs the conducting of this discussion."

He also announced the establishment of a cross-ministerial committee on the phenomenon of discrimination against men, and promised to use the power of the Knesset to research the system's response to complaints and failure to prosecute false claims.