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Kav LaOved (The Worker's Hotline), Tel Aviv

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Final Report

It is hard to believe that my IHRP fellowship at Kav LaOved (The Worker's Hotline) has already come to an end. It was incredibly motivating and energizing to return to the organization that exposed me to employment law as an avenue to achieve social justice for forced migrants. I was constantly inspired by my clients and coworkers.

Casework

As part of my fellowship, I re-assumed my responsibilities as a refugee caseworker, a position I held for nine months before starting law school. It was exciting to be able to jump back into my work right as I started my first week at the organization. As Israeli students who normally volunteer at KLO were busy with exams and other volunteers took the summer months to travel, my presence was appreciated.

As a caseworker, I was responsible for opening new files or following up on existing files with clients who visit our office during our intake hours on Tuesdays. Often with a translator, we gathered all the information we could about the file and sent a letter or called the employer to alert them of the issue. Throughout the week I worked on these cases and those opened by other volunteers.

New mothers often ask for our assistance in writing resignation letters. New mothers have until six months from the birth of their child to choose to leave their job to take care of their child and still receive severance pay as if they were fired. However, it is only with the intervention of Kav LaOved that these rules are enforced. Writing a proper resignation letter is essential for protecting their rights. As writing is the most challenging task for me in Hebrew, this task always served as a good reminder of the linguistic barriers faced by my clients and the importance of patience in my line of work.



Pictured: Discussing files with a fellow caseworker

Calculating Withheld Benefits and Pension Payments

I have established a modest reputation in the office for my work in calculating withheld wages and social benefits. When workers in Israel end their employment, there is a process which roughly translates to “the closing of the account”. Employers must pay out to their leaving employees sums for items such as unused vacation days, pension, severance payment and pay in lieu of early notice. Beyond this, it is an opportunity to hold employers accountable for unpaid overtime, overcharged health insurance, illegal deductions, unpaid sick leave and any miscalculations throughout the employment. I enjoy combing through payslips to find discrepancies between the law and what was paid to the worker.

Most volunteers use an [online calculator](#) (feel free to try it yourself!) to do these calculations. However, the calculator is not complex enough to account for changes in wages and percentage time worked, leading to vast discrepancies between our calculations and those of the employer when workers have been employed for several years. During my previous stint at Kav LaOved, I moved to calculating these rights on an excel spreadsheet for more accurate calculations.

While I was happy to do the calculations for the files of other volunteers, I knew this was not sustainable but at the same time had difficulty explaining to volunteers how I did these calculations. Thus upon my return, I set out to create a template on excel that would allow volunteers to calculate with the same precision without a strong grasp of Microsoft Excel. After several weeks of trial and error, I created an excel sheet which calculates rights based on each month, rather than by year. I then spent another several weeks working with

a supervising lawyer to perfect the excel template and solicited feedback from volunteers and staff. I have received positive feedback from users and plan to develop additional resources for other sectors of the organization remotely.

Worker's Rights and Refugee Resettlement

One of the more enriching aspects of working at Kav LaOved is that we witnessed and assisted with refugee resettlement at the pre-departure stage. We had many clients leaving to Canada during the month of June and then departures to Sweden in July and August. The lesser discussed side of being accepted as a refugee in a Western country is that individuals and families wait for years to be accepted but then once accepted are given only a few weeks to pack up the lives they have built, sometimes for nearly a decade.

One such case I assisted was for a young mother who was accepted with her daughter for asylum in The Netherlands. She had been working at a hotel and knew of coworkers who were unable to withdraw the pension funds they had accumulated. Not expecting to ever return to Israel, she asked our help to withdraw her pension in time. Over dozens of phone calls, I had to coordinate between the hotel and the pension company to make sure that the correct funds were available before she left. Ultimately, the pension company sent the funds to her bank account the day before her flight. Luckily there was a branch of her bank at the airport and she was able to withdraw her savings just hours before the flight! She is now able to set up her new life with almost 3,000 Euros more than she would have had without our intervention.

Challenging Unjust Laws

We are still tackling the draconian law which, as of this May, mandates employers to set aside 20% of refugees' salaries to an account which can only be accessed upon their departure from Israel. This is an atrocious workers' rights violation. The organization has been giving lectures to refugees on how this new law will work. I gave several such lecture to a group of women who were taking a course in hairdressing. This was the hardest thing that I had to do during my fellowship. However, when attending a [protest against the law](#), I bumped into quite a few of the women from the lecture and their children. It was incredibly inspiring to see the community peacefully refuse to accept this law.



Pictured: A group photo of the petitioners to the Supreme Court of Israel and Kav LaOved staff.

This new law has greatly increased the amount of assistance which Kav LaOved has to provide. The Israeli government has largely failed at implementing the mechanisms promised to collect and administer the funds. Dozens of clients have turned to the organization for help because employers have been incorrectly making these deductions. Many workers have chosen to quit their jobs in an attempt to collect benefits or pension owed to them by their employers to pay for basic necessities such as rent. These issues and many others were brought forward by [Kav LaOved at a Supreme Court hearing at the end of July](#), which I had the opportunity to attend. Five different lawyers presented arguments and it was fascinating to hear the issues presented from five very different perspectives. Since the hearing, we have worked to dispel rumors the law was canceled, in order to protect workers from quitting their jobs based on a suspicion that their employer was stealing from them. Another hearing has been scheduled for December of this year. The many instances that we have seen of the law not being followed correctly and the negative outcomes will be presented as evidence against the law by Kav LaOved at that time.

Submission to the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Lastly, I have been responsible for the organization's submission for the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) at the UN. Civil society organizations are invited to submit shadow reports to complement self-reporting by state signatories to the convention. To do so, I have supervised a volunteer's research on various publications by the Israeli government and compiled previous research done by Kav LaOved. Using what I learned about gendered issues during my bachelor's degree, I have worked to write an insightful comparison of the government's reports on the status of women in the Israeli labour market and the cases handled by Kav LaOved. This has been a challenging but educational experience in balancing being critical of deficiencies of the state while not harming the relationship with government offices that provide funding to the organization.

