

Voice from the field:

“On fish, fishing rods and lakes” – The Achoti fair trade project¹

REUT REINA BENDRIHEM

Shula: “For years it’s been clear to me that women have a crying need to promote their own financial security. Indeed, many organisations are engaged in devoted and zealous efforts to provide women with diverse channels for economic empowerment. Yet it’s also been clear to me that these channels do not offer a holistic response for women who have difficulty surviving within the poverty and economic distress they experience on a daily basis. While others have focused on how to offer “fish and fishing rods” to these women, I recognised the need to provide them with a lake as well, for otherwise, where would they catch their fish? Thus the subtitle of the Achoti Fair Trade movement – “of fishing rods and lakes” – was inspired both by the proverbial saying, “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch fish, and you feed him for a lifetime,” and by the understanding that fishing rods are not sufficient – lakes are needed as well.

“In other words, I felt that not only has the time come to train women to grow and economic initiatives, but also that the conditions are now ripe to create a genuine platform to provide them a secure and stable foundation over time. In this way the idea for the shop was born – a place where women would be able to sell their products to the broader public of consumers, both male and female”.

The Achoti Fair Trade Shop project is an innovative economic initiative, the first of its kind in Israel. The project is based upon integrating the economic empowerment of women positioned at the geographic and social margins of Israel with the education of the public toward a new type of consumerism based on the principles of fair trade. The Achoti Fair Trade Shop was founded in 2008 by the Achoti (“Sister”) for Women in

Israel organisation. Today 16 social organisations are partners in the project, including the Ehete Center for Ethiopian Women in Kiryat Gat, Sindyanina of Galilee, the Al Va'ad ("Promise") organisation and Kol Ha-Isha (KHI) – The Jerusalem Women's Centre.

The more than one hundred creative women who participate in this project come from unique cultural groups and from rich and varied worlds of knowledge, tradition, culture and experience. Almost all of the members possess skills and talents acquired over the course of their lives, such as embroidery, sewing, cooking, weaving and sculpting. The Achoti organisation helps these women translate this unique knowledge into viable businesses, and offers them a dependable setting for carrying out their business activities. The shops, established in Tel-Aviv and Abu Gosh, offer a selection of products from the producers varied fields of endeavour, along with products produced by cooperatives of productive women.²

The project's beginnings

Reut: "How did the fair trade project begin?"

Shula: "In effect, from the moment Achoti was established we were engaged in activities on behalf of women. Achoti was established in 2000. Even before that, Mizrahi feminists were active in the feminist sphere, though this "feminist space" was in effect dominated by Ashkenazi feminists. These Ashkenazi feminists presumably spoke on behalf of everyone, in a manner similar to the worldwide white feminist hegemony that assumes it is representative of all women.³ In referring to the "glass ceiling" they believe they represent all women, but in fact most women are nowhere near the glass ceiling."

Reut: "In effect they are inside 'cement boxes'."⁴

Shula: "Yes, most women are. That's what has led Mizrahi feminism to direct the struggle to very specific directions. One of them is equal representation. That is, white feminists should not represent women who are not part of the white hegemony, such as Mizrahi, Palestinian, Ethiopian and working women. Ashkenazi feminism is interested in subjects such as pilot's licenses for women, a subject I personally oppose because it is tied to militarism, which in my view is not at all feminist. Ashkenazi feminists have also tried to help women advance into positions on boards of directors and to increase the number of women holding jobs of this nature. This is important for its own sake but is not at all relevant to many other

women. We are fighting to represent women from all groups. The struggle is not only for equality between women and men but also for equal representation of women from all ethnic and national groups. Our major argument with the feminist movement and the feminist organisations in Israel is that women whose situations have been economically undermined and weakened should be at the heart of the feminist agenda. We must focus not only on glass ceilings, but on muddy floors as well,⁵ because that's where most women are. At the feminist conference in 1999, we presented a project titled the Action Year Coalition. The Achoti movement was founded in 2000 and subsequently established a coalition of many organisations.”

The Achoti movement was founded based on the principles of Mizrahi feminism. Mizrahi feminism is the only feminist movement in Israel whose members come from all sectors of society, among them intellectuals, artists, owners of small businesses, labourers who have been laid off and homeless mothers (Shiran, 2002). The movement was born out of Mizrahi women's desire to provide immediate assistance to the disinherited women in their communities, and at the same time to promote empowerment and social justice over the long term. These marginalised women were inspired by the voices of black feminists in the United States who, beginning in the 1970s, claimed that white feminism had not managed to rise above the racism, ethnocentrism and inequality characterising the public sphere in the West and the liberal feminist movement within it (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983; Lavie, 2010).

Achoti is the first organisation to be founded by Mizrahi women in Israel. Achoti is a holistic organisation concerned with the experiences of women who have been oppressed and pushed to the margins of Israeli society. The top item on the organisation's agenda is the exclusion of Mizrahi women in Israel based on status, ethnicity and gender.

In 2000, Achoti declared the Year of Action as its flagship project. For the first time, working women not situated at the centres of power and decision-making were positioned at the centre of discourse and action. The Year of Action united different organisations into a coalition that acted to promote their rights (Bakal, 2002).

Shula: “Within the working structure of the Year of Action coalition we set up many projects, among them projects to promote the rights of women factory workers. To my regret, however, government privatisation policies resulted in the closing of many factories and as a consequence many women became unemployed. This led us to advance a stage, toward creating sources of income for unemployed women or those who are supported by government stipends. These women have very few opportunities on the job market, other than working in cleaning or working for subcontractors. We believe that knowledge is not only something acquired in

universities or in academia. It is something also possessed by women who have no academic education. Their education was passed down from mother to daughter; knowledge in arts and crafts, cooking, moulding clay, embroidery, weaving, sewing and the like. So we established a project that has come to be known as Women Cook Up a Business, a project that now can be seen in many places in Israel. Women have remarkable cooking skills but they do not support themselves through these skills. There are many male chefs who learned from their mothers and grandmothers and then went out to make a living in this field, while the women stay in the kitchen and receive no compensation. We run a community kitchen in Jerusalem together with Kol Ha-Isha. We also set up another project in Kiryat Gat called the Ethiopian Embroidery and Sewing Centre, where women produce remarkable handicrafts. Another project we founded is the Ehete Centre. The Amharic word "ehete" means "sister", and the centre serves as an occupational and cultural centre for Ethiopian women. These projects provide training for women. Many organisations have begun to join in and to train women to set up their own businesses."

The Fair Trade working model

The notion of fair trade originated in the revolutionary economic outlook known as micro-investment and micro-entrepreneurship. These socioeconomic concepts were developed by banker, economist and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Prof. Muhammad Yunus for rehabilitating weakened population groups and women in particular. According to Yunus, giving small loans to weakened population groups to be invested in small businesses – which he refers to as "social businesses" – can bring about amazing results through the empowerment of the economically disadvantaged and through removing them from the cycle of poverty. A "social business" is a business for all intents and purposes, except that it does not distribute dividends and it sells products at prices that enable it to maintain itself. The owners of such a business can recoup their initial investment in the company, but as a rule investors do not receive their profits in the form of dividends. All the profits remain in the company, in order to finance expansion and to produce new goods and services aimed at being useful and socially beneficial (Yunus & Weber, 2007).

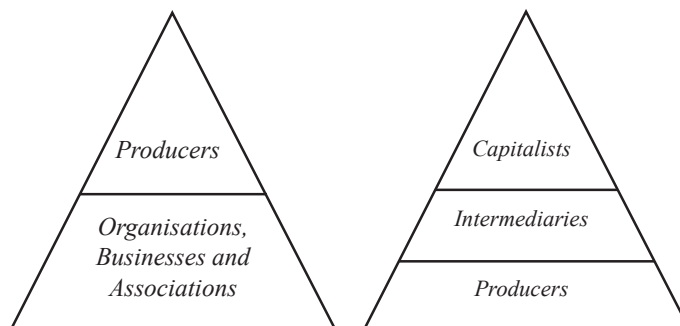
Based on this model, different support systems were built to help women from weakened population groups set up small businesses and thus to remove them and their families from the cycle of poverty. The Achoti movement is based on the notion of social and supportive business, and works in cooperation with many organisations in Israel and worldwide. The movement trains and helps women to establish small businesses based on their handiwork talents and existing skills, usually in traditional

fields of production: food, weaving, handicrafts, textiles and art.

Fair Trade is an organised worldwide social movement based on the vision of an egalitarian, just and sustainable world. The movement serves as an umbrella organisation of groups seeking to help millions of small producers live decent and respectable lives. The Fair Trade movement has developed a new form of trade based on dialogue, respect, transparency and long-term commitment. It focuses on improving the living conditions of farmers, labourers and craftspeople in developing nations and on ensuring their future. The movement, now active in 58 countries, was established as a protest against conventional forms of commerce, which were unable to provide a livelihood to millions of hardworking people worldwide.⁶

The capitalists are at the top of today's global economic pyramid and the producers are at the base. But in fair trade shops, the pyramid has been turned upside down, with producers at the top. At the base of this pyramid are organisations, business owners and foundations that support productivity. In today's world of consumerism, the identity of the producers has been concealed. They remain anonymous, nameless and faceless to the customers. One of the objectives of the fair trade model is to recognise and identify the faces and stories of the producers (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Comparison between conventional trade and fair trade models



Reut: “What is the fair trade model in Israel?”

Shula: “In 2008 we formed a fair trade coalition comprising many organisations engaged in the employment of women.⁷ In effect we took the European fair trade model, which developed in the wake of radical capitalism and also operates in the United States. Fair trade began to develop when factories began moving to Asia and Africa and employing women, men and often even children for slave wages. The Fair Trade movement emerged as a counter-response to this. Members of the

movement come to these factories, purchase the products at a fair price, import them to Europe and sell them to shops. We developed our own unique model of Israeli fair trade, which operates according to the Jewish ethical principle of giving first priority to the poor and needy among you. We give first priority to women from across Israel, whether they are Jewish or not, including Arab women, women from Ethiopia and even women from the Palestinian Authority."

The fair trade model in Israel operates along two axes, that of the organisation and that of the product, and is based on the international model that has been adapted to the Israeli context.

Organizational level

In 2008 a Fair Trade coalition was established in Israel. This coalition was based on the Jewish ethical principle of giving first precedence to the poor and needy among you: "your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first." That is, the coalition gave preference to population groups excluded from the prevailing economic, social and political system in Israel. Moreover, fair trade in Israel also operates out of a commitment to the principles of feminism. An additional goal is to raise awareness of the concept of fair trade among Israeli consumers.

The Fair Trade movement in Israel works in accordance with the following principles:

1. Offering economic-social opportunities to talented female producers excluded from the economic system on the basis of gender, ethnicity, nationality and status.
2. Deliberately expressing a preference for products produced by men and women from the geographic, ethnic, economic and social margins while conforming to the rules of international law.
3. Maintaining fair and respectful commercial relations with those participating in the commerce, while giving preference to producers who provide information on the terms and conditions of manufacture.
4. Promoting social justice, and feminist and environmental values.
5. Ensuring that the product and its packaging will be of good quality, while using advertising and marketing strategies that are open and fair and do not use diversionary techniques.

6. Generating ongoing relations with the producers, promoting their economic independence and constantly striving to upgrade their products.
7. Maintaining fair prices that cover production costs and include advance and fair payment to the producers. Ensuring equal pay for equal work among men and women.
8. Promoting gender equality and giving preference to activities that encourage solidarity among women as producers and consumers.
9. Providing healthy and safe working conditions for the producers.
10. Prohibiting child labour according to the conventions of the United Nations and the laws of the State of Israel, and ensuring that work does not cause harm to children's safety and well-being or to the time devoted to their education and to play.

Reut: "How do these principles find expression with respect to women?"

Shula: "If, for example, I produce chocolate or ceramics, the coalition does the costing. We ask each producer to indicate the number of hours she worked, the cost of the materials she purchased and all the expenses included in producing the product. The women do this costing in a way that is most profitable for the producers, as opposed to in ordinary commerce where the producers are at the bottom of the pyramid and where a chain of people bite into the profit, leaving the producers with very little. Our pyramid is upside down, with the producers at the top. The fact that we are a non-profit organisation facilitates direct contact without any intermediaries, and to me this is truly fair trade as we intended it to be. By the way, in Europe this has now turned into a way of doing business with many intermediaries. Because we are an NGO we can maintain direct trade without intermediaries."

Product level

The product level comprises of three main stages. First, the project strives to integrate the work of communities of women with traditional production skills into contemporary design and production processes. On the one hand, these processes seek to value and preserve the skills of these women and the tradition from which they draw their productivity. On the other hand, they involve the development of a marketing

line that will enable these women to upgrade their products in order to reach diverse and robust target markets. The processes are based upon cooperation between the Achoti Fair Trade initiative and a course titled "A Studio of Your Own – Women and Design", taught by Anat Stein in the Design Department at the Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts. The students in this course were "matched" to women artists, craftspeople, cooks and other producers across the country, and they worked together to promote the women's products by means of branding and marketing. The main objective of this cooperative effort was to improve the visibility and media presence of the products when displayed in the shop.

The second stage involves focusing on product branding and visibility. During this stage, the project markets the product as a brand through critical adherence to economic branding processes that are faithful to the principles of free trade and yet are in no way inferior to the aggressive branding tactics of giant corporations. This branding is based on a multi-system approach that integrates art, economics and feminism and brings together experts in the fields of sales, design and marketing with the goal of creating public visibility for the women's products.

The last stage focuses on making the product accessible to the consumers. Despite major efforts by various organisations in Israel to bring about economic empowerment and fair trade, many women producers in Israel are unable to support themselves decently by their own labour because they do not have access to consumer markets. Many of these producers market their products only in their immediate geographic surroundings, usually economically disadvantaged areas. These producers lack the economic means to develop an effective sales and marketing network. Thus, they are unable to make a profit and extract themselves from the cycle of poverty. The Achoti Fair Trade Shop markets the products of these women and engages in activities to raise consumer awareness of these producers.

Reut: "What role does the Achoti Fair Trade Shop play with respect to women? What in effect are you doing for women?"

Shula: "In addition to marketing and upgrading products, we also offer courses and individual support. We provide training and courses on how to set up a business, and we advise businesses on how to upgrade and sell their products. These women are surrounded by a warm and friendly personal environment, and we support them on an individual basis. Some of the women really have managed to support themselves in an amazing manner. They start off as small businesses exempt from VAT that can earn up to 70,000 shekels per year, and advance to becoming full-fledged licensed businesses. But this is not the case for most. Most of the women manage to support themselves but do not earn huge sums. For some

of the women we take care that their work does not cancel out any stipend they may be receiving, such as old-age pensions or disability pensions.”

Social economics as an alternative for change

The Achoti Fair Trade Shop is the first fair trade shop in Israel and in the entire Middle East. Its retail brand is one of the only fair trade brands in the world today structured upon the principles of promoting a unique reference group – women from disadvantaged population groups in the State of Israel.⁸

The establishment of the first store at the corner of King George Street in the centre of Tel Aviv stresses the symbolism of bringing the periphery to the centre. It confronts consumers with the messages of alternative social economics, and exposes them to these messages through ongoing dissemination and publicity activities. Hence, the shop serves as a centre of fair trade activities along with cultural and artistic activities. The shop offers commercial brands and organisations business evidence for recognising social economics as a legitimate business alternative for conducting ongoing transactions. It thus promotes the existence of social economics as an alternative of equal value, and perhaps even as the preferred alternative, for acquiring goods for their employees, for investment and for establishing fair trade categories in their own retail outlets.

The Achoti Fair Trade Shop project offers a rationale for economic and social change. This rationale is based on the rapid and significant growth of retailing in the local market and in the world in general. This growth finds expression in the increasing strength of retail chains and their retail brands as their primary marketing tool. The creation of a successful retail brand that sustains itself while conforming to the strict principles of fair trade and responsible social economics represents a major change in the field in that it signals to other retailers and franchise holders that this notion has the business potential that can lead to success.

Today, a developing business initiative seeks to duplicate the model of the fair trade shop across Israel and even elsewhere in the world. These options for expansion form the initial basis for developing an alternative form of economics. The retail brand of the Achoti Fair Trade Shop currently represents the products of 200 local producers in Israel (an increase in representation of 100% over the past year), who produce around 800 high quality products on display at the flagship store in Tel-Aviv.

Reut: “I see that this project means a lot to you, What is the most important thing you want to promote?”

Shula: "For me, the success of the shop has proven that revolutions are not always the result of resistance to existing methods or of the shattering of social conventions. They are not always the result of ongoing Sisyphean efforts at the margins of society in the hope of bringing about the desired change. Revolutions can also be accomplished by understanding what there is, connecting to it and its existing patterns and leading from within toward a fair and worthwhile alternative solution. This can be brought about by assimilating feminist and social values that generate behavioural and perceptual changes in practice."

In this spirit, my activities can be considered innovative along many dimensions, beginning on the social-philosophical level of the means and approaches to bring about change and continuing on the national level, as exemplified in the coming together of 16 partners from Israel's leading social feminist organisations. The next dimension is the cooperative dimension, which involves recruiting resources in Israel and other communities to support this innovative concept, positioning Israel on the world fair trade map, marketing innovation in creating a new commercial brand based on social-educational values and creating a branded retail platform with the potential to become an international franchise chain providing producers with genuine and fair opportunities to market and sell their products to the general public and to bring about practical improvements in their status.

NOTE

- 1 Based on an interview with Shula Keshet, CEO of Achoti. The interview took place on June 17, 2013 in Tel-Aviv.
- 2 The following economic cooperatives participate in the project: The Ethiopian Embroidery and Sewing Centre, through which women produce baskets, bags, jewellery and sculptures from the best of the Ethiopian tradition and culture; Women Cook Up a Business, a cooperative supported by Achoti and by Kol Ha-Isha, which provides food products such as jams to the shop as well as to catering services; a cooperative of productive women and weavers in the north operating with Sindyanna of Galilee that provides organic olive oil and woven baskets; an agricultural cooperative that produces olive oil, carob syrup and hyssop with the support of the Peula Yeruka (Green Action) organisation; productive women from the Arous Elbahar organization in Yafo; a cooperative of women from Al-Eizariya whose embroidered products

such as bags and wallets are known for their delicate and unique handiwork.

- 3 For more on the topic of the balance of powers between Western feminism and third-world feminism, see: Mohanty C.T, (1988), “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” *Feminist Review*, 30, Autumn 1988, pp.65-88.
- 4 This concept is borrowed from the book by Pnina Motzafi-Haller titled *In the Cement Boxes: Mizrahi Women in the Israeli Periphery*, The Hebrew University Magnes Press.
- 5 “Glass ceiling” and “muddy floor” are terms taken from a gendered analysis of the labor market and describe economic, social and political barriers for women (Izraeli, 1999).
- 6 From the website of Achoti (Sister) – for Women in Israel: <http://www.achoti.com/viewStaticPage.aspx?pageID=26>
- 7 The Achoti Fair Trade shop in Israel created a coalition of organisations known as Sachah (Hebrew acronym for fair trade). The social organisations in the coalition included Achoti (“Sister”) – for Women in Israel; the Ehete Centre for Ethiopian Women in Kiryat Gat; Economic Empowerment for Women (EEW); the Tel-Aviv University program for business entrepreneurship and economic justice; Sindyanna of Galilee; The ‘For You’ Organization; Al Va’ad; Green Action; Kol Ha-Isha (KHI) - The Jerusalem Women’s Centre; the Heschel Sustainability Centre; Women Cook up a Business; Sidreh – Lakiya; the Shoruk Institute; and the Horfish Lace Makers. Taken from the Achoti website: <http://www.achoti.com/viewStaticPage.aspx?pageID=30>
- 8 The fair trade retail brands market non-branded goods from various countries.

REFERENCES

- Achoti (Sister) for Women in Israel. Retrieved from: <http://www.achoti.org.il/?cat=24>
<http://www.achoti.com/viewStaticPage.aspx?pageID=26> (2013 May 12)
- Anzaldúa, G. & Moraga, C. (1983). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. New York: Kitchen Table Press.
- Bakal, I. (2002). My sister is organizing. In V. Damari-Madar (Ed.), *Impertinence: Mizrahi feminism* (pp. 36-37). Jerusalem: Students for Social Justice. [Hebrew]

- Fairtrade International website. Retrieved from: <http://www.fairtrade.net/> (2013 May 8) .
- Izraeli, D. (1999) Gender at workplace. In D. Izraeli, A. Friedman, H. Dahan-Kalev, S. Fogel-Bijaoui, H. Herzog, M. Hasan, H. Naveh, (Eds.), *Gender, sex, politics* (pp. 165-215). Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuchad. [Hebrew]
- Lavie, S. (2010). Mizrahi feminism and the Palestinian question. *Seder*, 5, 119-134. [Hebrew]
- Mohanty C.T. (1988). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourse. *Feminist Review*, 30, 65-88.
- Motzafi-Haller, P. (2012). *In the cement boxes: Mizrahi women in the Israeli periphery*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press. [Hebrew]
- Shiran, V. (2002). Symmetric self-representation: The contribution of Mizrahi women to feminism in Israel. In V. Damari-Madar, (Ed.), *Impertinence: Mizrahi feminism* (pp. 12-19). Jerusalem: Students for Social Justice. [Hebrew]
- Yunus, M. & Weber, K. (2007). *Creating a world without poverty: Social business and the future of capitalism*. New York: Public Affairs.