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Single mothers are struggling to survive during COVID: “A mother shouldn’t have to choose between food for herself and food for her baby.”

3 young single mothers, who grew up as at-risk youth, are hardly surviving the Corona period • With no work nor money for food, they hit rock bottom – and receive support from ELEM • One of the three even admits: “I sleep with men so I can afford food for my baby.”

Written by Amir Alon

Young single mothers are forced to face a harsh reality during normal times, and all the more so during the Corona crisis. The women, who had rough lives, worked hard to find employment, but these days some of them were fired and they can’t find a job. Many don’t qualify for unemployment, and since that is the case, they can’t provide for their young children at home. The financial and mental distress of this time forces them to face painful memories from their pasts.

The unemployment statistics clearly show that women and young people especially suffer due to the financial crisis. The young single mothers are the weakest link in this tapestry. According to data from ELEM, there’s been a 250% increase in inquiries from young single mothers during the Corona period.

One of the young women who’s forced to face these major hardships is May Zilberman, a 21 years old single mother from Kiryat Motzkin. She has a 9 months old baby and she can’t find a full time job. Since she has no other options, she’s working 10 hours a week at a grocery store in her neighborhood. After taxes and rent, her monthly income is only 5570 NIS (\$1634 – ELEM USA,) which places her and her young son under the poverty line.

“Due to COVID many places shut down, or aren’t looking for employees or prefer to not hire new people,” said May. “I went to employment agencies and they simply had nothing to offer me, so I started at the grocery store and that’s what I have to get by with. With this salary I can’t survive the month and I’m asking my mom for help, because I have no other choice.”

Many compromises

May's daily struggle of raising a baby while having a very low income is especially challenging. "I have to count every single Shekel," she says. "I can't afford buying him too many things, because the money that I'd allocate for toys or attractions I need to save for food for him and paying the bills."

The compromises are many. "I haven't bought new clothes or makeup in three months. If once I could afford hanging out with a friend, now I can't. Before I go to the supermarket I make a list of the absolute essentials. It's been a long time since I bought snacks or splurged on a bag of cookies."

"I only buy what is an absolute must and try my best to save on my own expenses and give more to him, because it's my job as a mother to take care of him first and foremost."

Her worries about what comes next intensify when she thinks about the upcoming school year, when her son will go to day care for the first time: "I'm stuck in uncertainty. Day care costs are insane, it's like renting an additional apartment."

May is critical of the government's policy and calls upon the leadership and members of the government to do more for young women such as herself, especially during the pandemic: "We're falling between the cracks. The government doesn't have the first idea about what's going on around us. I'd like to see a member of the government telling their own kid that they can't have what they want because there's no money, or that you're not sure you'll have a way to feed them in a week or two."

No unemployment

L. 19 years old from southern Israel, had a rough go at it since she was a child. She was removed from her home when she was 8 and since then has been passed between 4 different places and establishments. A year ago, she moved in with the family of a friend, and six months later she gave birth. COVID arrived right after she started sending her baby son to day care and started to work in retail.

Her plan was to save money for a few months and then rent her own place. But due to the pandemic she was fired, with no eligibility for unemployment, and through guaranteed minimal income she's receiving a minuscule amount. Her friend's parents were also put on furlough, which resulted in them asking her to leave their house within two weeks.

That's how she found herself homeless with a baby. Having no other solution, she started rotating between houses of friends, and men who knew her in the past, some of whom sexually abused her.

"I find myself skipping meals, hungry," she confessed. "When I go to the supermarket I almost always need to choose what to invest the money in. A mother shouldn't have to choose between eating or feeding her baby and say yes to a man just so she can afford baby food."

Flashbacks

18.5 years old N. from the Jerusalem area is a single mother with an 18 months old baby. She suffered ongoing sexual abuse inside the family when she was a child. At 14 she started roaming the streets and using drugs and drinking alcohol as part of her survival strategy. A year after, she transferred to a welfare establishment and cut ties with her family. She was only 16 when she was impregnated by an older man who refused to recognize the child as his own.

She's currently unemployed. She receives support funds that cover her food expenses as well as basic child-related necessities, but she can't manage to cover the rent, and is about to be evicted. In addition to all the hardships, the pandemic takes her back to a time that she'd much rather forget: "This period made me feel lonely and caused anxiety that keeps intensifying."

She had more to say about the rough circumstances: "I'm experiencing flashbacks to abuse that I've been through, going back to negative patterns from my past and once again I'm thinking about something that will numb it all and will help me escape my reality for just a moment. It affects my baby, too." N.'s landlord who hasn't received his payments is losing his patience. "He's financially struggling as well at the moment, yet he still agreed to wait on 2 months of rent," she explained. "I'm afraid I won't be able to pay rent and then my baby will be taken away."

No money left

These three young women are being helped by ELEM as part of the program "From Protection to Independence" that ELEM operates with funding from the Ministry of Welfare. "During the first wave we helped young mothers and encountered great distress," says Noa Gol-Perker, the program's manager. "The emotional distress manifests in the form anxiety and the resurfacing of past traumas, and on the material level, these mothers found themselves facing a reality where there's no money left

even for basic baby essentials. We got on board to help these young women with donations, food packages and also with personal sponsorship through Whatsapp and Zoom.”

“Many of these mothers were fired during the pandemic, having no assistance or family support, and got to the point of having nothing, of starvation, inability to buy baby food,” added ELEM Israel CEO, Inbal Dor Kerbel. “Even with the hardships this period brought to the surface, our teams were in daily touch with each one of them and provided mental and material support during this rough period. We will continue to be there for them and help them even during this challenging time.”

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