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Protests against exclusion of Arabs in child welfare conference win out

Organizers respond to requests from legislators, invite several Arab experts to speak in conference.

By Shirly Seidler | Feb. 10, 2015 | 12:35 AM

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Several Arab experts will be addressing the 2015 Be'er Sheva Conference on the Wellbeing of the Child, scheduled for February 16-17, after a coalition of social-justice groups protested that no Arab experts had been scheduled to participate and no issues specific to the Arab and Bedouin communities were to be discussed.

The coalition, which calls itself Shutfut-Sharakah —Organizations for a shared, Democratic, and Equal Society, wrote to Knesset members who were scheduled to attend the two-day conference, asking them to boycott the event and protest the exclusion of Arabs.

After receiving inquiries from several lawmakers, the National Council for the Child, which organizes the conference, added three to four Arabs to the conference program. Shutfut-Sharakah said, "This quick response is additional proof that the organizers could have included Arab speakers."

In the letter to the MKs, the group wrote, "To our shock, no Arab expert is participating as a speaker at the conference, not even as a representative of the youth. Similarly, the conference organizers did not see fit to hold a session that deals with the unique problems affecting the welfare of Arab children in Israel."

"The fact that they don't invite Arab experts portrays a false picture that there are no Arab experts in the various disciplines represented at the conference who can contribute to the important discussions taking place," the coalition said.

"The absence of people working in the field in the Arab community means the conference will not debate aspects related to the welfare of Arab children."

The National Council for the Child said there had been no deliberate intention to exclude speakers from the Arab or Bedouin communities, but acknowledged that "more attention should have been given to the final, undesirable result. The vast majority of the problems discussed at the conference sessions relate to the Arab population just as they relate to the general public, starting with the silence of child victims during investigations to the issue of child and infant neglect. We believe in an equitable approach that discusses an Arab child as equal to a Jewish child and not distinguishing between them by holding separate sessions [about their issues]."

The council noted that in each of the previous 13 conferences there had been Arab lecturers, and to single out one conference created a distortion.

Nevertheless, the council said, "We are making a special effort, despite the time constraints, to integrate lecturers from the Arab community in this year's conference (which is next week!), and there will apparently be 3-4 lecturers from the Arab community at various sessions at this year's conference."