

Justice Ministry fesses up over plan to increase rabbinic courts' power

• By RUTH EGLASH

Representatives of the Justice Ministry admitted Monday that discussions had already been held to consider increasing the power of the country's rabbinic courts to include decisions on money matters and children in divorce cases.

At a special hearing of the Knesset Committee on the Advancement of the Status of Women called by chairwoman MK Tzipi Hotovely (Likud), attorney Horsha Gottlieb, adviser to Justice Minister Yaakov Neeman, confirmed that the rabbinic courts had presented a bill aimed at increasing their power and explained that the minister was still in the process of evaluating the proposal.

"It is a plan inherited from the previous government," said Gottlieb, contradicting comments made last week by Neeman, who claimed that no such proposal existed.

Shimon Yacobi, legal adviser to the rabbinic courts, said the basis of the legislation was to enable the religious legal system to make additional rulings in divorce cases, even after a legal separation had been decided.

Any changes to the status quo that would give the rabbinic courts more power could end up being detrimental to the status of women in Israel, said Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari – head of Bar-Ilan's Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women, and Israel's representative on the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

According to Halperin-Kaddari – who was present at the hearing and whose view was echoed by other women's rights groups there – the three problematic changes include a motion to preclude the civil courts' handling cases involving damages against husbands who refuse to grant their wives a *get* (Jewish divorce); granting the rabbinic courts jurisdiction over money matters in divorce proceedings; and permitting the religious courts to make decisions on issues that arise after a divorce has been ratified, even if the case was initially heard in the secular court system.

"The ministry is trying to give the impression that these suggestions are only preliminary, but at today's meeting we found out that they are indeed concrete proposals," said Halperin-Kaddari. "But I truly believe that the rabbinic courts are very serious about increasing their powers and have just been waiting for the right time and a sympathetic minister to accept their cause."

In conclusion, Hotovely said that the frank discussion between the rabbinic courts and women's rights groups was a positive step toward resolving some of the issues. She said that the committee would reevaluate the proposal after the justice minister had made his recommendations.