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## The breakthrough of Bedouin women in Northern Israel – a conflict between generations

### KEYWORDS

young women, Bedouin, tradition

### ABSTRACT

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The article examines the breakthrough of Bedouin women in Northern Israel, based on the testimony of twenty young Bedouin women who did not accept the 'traditional' role of the woman, in the family in particular and in Bedouin society in the village in general. This group of women succeeded in breaking the boundaries of the tribe and struggled for the right to complete high school and even to study in the institutions of higher education.

Bedouin society is found in a process of change in the transition to the modern world, and this change influences the status of Bedouin women. Therefore, for example, the acquisition of education in the formal educational system gradually led to a profound crisis and change in the Bedouin woman's status. This exposure was intended to develop possibilities for the young Bedouin woman, but this exposure also caused her to cope with cultural obstacles set by a patriarchal tribal society found in a process of transition and political obstacles since she is a Bedouin and a part of Israeli society. Many research studies have been performed on Bedouin society in the south of Israel<sup>1</sup>. However, very little has been written on the Bedouin in the north.

<sup>1</sup> For more about the Bedouin in the south of Israel see: Abu Ravia, 2000; Abu-Saad, 1991; Abu-Saad, 1995; Abu-Saad, 1997; Abu-Saad, Abu-Saad, Lewando-Hundt, Forman, Belmaker, Ber-

## Contemporary changes in Bedouin society

Bedouin society is a patriarchal tribal society that is found in the processes of transition. Marks (Marks, 1971: 3–13) asserts that there is a traditional division of roles in which the man decides everything and earns the family livelihood and the working of women will erode the man's status in the family. In this type of family, the young woman must learn to cope and sometimes even negotiate over basic demands with all the family members, including the grandparents and sometimes relatives. Moreover, according to Bedouin tradition young Bedouin women marry at a young age, between seventeen and nineteen, and therefore if a young woman chooses to go to study at the university, her chances of finding a groom are poor.

Ben-David (Ben David, 1993) holds that the transition from one lifestyle to another leads to changes in education. Abu Ravia (Abu Ravia, 2000) maintains that because of the transition to an urban lifestyle the roles between the sexes were changed. Pessate-Schubert (Pessate-Schubert, 1999) asserts that the transition in the lifestyle causes the woman to sit at home, lacking work and lacking an education.

Rimlet (Rimlet, 1991: 52–58) asserts that the new lifestyle, an urban lifestyle, requires increased consumption, and therefore women go to work so as to maintain a high standard of living.

## Research results

Today in anthropology it is customary to research near the home (Rabinovitz, 1995: 5–19). In the present research study, the Bedouin village of Beit Zarzir is my home and the Bedouin women are from this home. The present research study was conducted in a Bedouin village called Beit Zarzir in the north of Israel and is based on interviews and the stories of twenty Bedouin women who acquired a higher education in different areas – medicine, teaching, engineering, social work. One of the interviewees is divorced, eleven are married, and eight are single. The interviews were conducted in the Hebrew language in the homes of the women and translated into Hebrew and then into English. Every interview lasted about two hours. The quotes from the interviewees were written as they were said, without adding or changing anything.

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endesset al., 1998; Adler, 1995; Anker, 1995; Ben-David, 1988; Ben-David, 1993; Ben-David, 1995; Fenster, 1999; Meir, 1994; Meir, Barnea, 1986; Mosokona-Lerman, 2001; Pessate-Schubert, 1999; Pessate-Schubert, 2000; Tal, 1993.

## **“Being the first” experience**

Almost all the interviewees who told about their experiences in the acquisition of an education felt the difficulty with “being the first”. They see themselves as breaking the trail, from the secure tribal space, and creating a precedent and a new reality in Bedouin population (Marks, 1971: 3–13).

The young women who are considered groundbreaking in the village created something new or rebelled against conservative Bedouin tradition that does not allow the woman to leave the area of the tribe and the village.

Amina says, “They were angry at me when I went to learn in a high school in Nazareth. They said that my father did not raise me properly according to the tradition and afterwards when I continued my studies in the university they said that I am too free and this is very negative in the eyes of the older people in the village. It was very difficult for me.”

Ranya recalls that, “I would see the examining and tracking eyes of the people in the village when I went out in the morning to wait for a bus and they also attempted to exert pressure on my father to marry me to my cousin so as to stop my studies.”

Tagrid says that, “The people in the village gossip about girls who wear modern clothing such as pants. I understand them since because of unemployment they are bored and therefore they look at who is coming and who is going and what she is wearing and how she is behaving. Therefore I prefer to dress traditionally and to put a head covering on my head.”

All the young women felt social pressure on them and their families to end their studies. They claim that their breakthrough created a precedent and a new reality in the village and there is no way back.

## **The conflict between the young women and the older people**

The older women also saw the educated young women to be a threat to their status in the family. The lack of education of the older Bedouin women puts them in an inferior position with the young women who go to acquire an education. According to one old lady from the village, “The role of the woman is to care for her children and her husband.”

The conflict between the young women and the older people was especially apparent in the change of the patterns of marriage. The accepted pattern in Bedouin society is marriage among relatives. Some of the interviewees told that

they surrendered to the family pressure to marry their relatives, while others received threats that the family financial support would be ended if they did not marry their cousins. However, the rest of the single women chose their studies, knowing that they are endangering their chances of marrying. Those who obeyed the instructions of their elders and even fulfilled their parents' expectations and in return needed to marry a cousin through matchmaking bought 'quiet', according to one of the young women.

The young Bedouin women who went to study in the university had to uphold the rules of their tradition, for example, a traditional external appearance and appropriate behavior, so as to calm their family and the tribe.

All the interviewees felt the subjective experience of "being the first" (Kassam, 2002: 72–83) and explained the difficulty in this experience and the effort to persuade those around them to accept the decision to go to learn or to work.

Bar-Tzvi (Bar-Tzvi, 1991) says that the fear of the traditionalists derives from the fear of dishonoring the family (see also Alatuna, 1993). In contrast, some maintain that the reservations about the women going outside of the home derive from religious reasons (Kama, 1984).

An older woman in the village says that "We must separate in the educational system, especially during adolescence, between boys and girls".

## Conclusions

To summarize, the groundbreaking young women extended the boundaries of their safe space and acquired anew knowledge and experience, which constitute a resource that shows their value and respect, so as to cope with the 'modern' world, although they are strongly blocked by members of the tribe. These young women are forced to stride slowly and cautiously without challenging the norms of the tribe, so as to attain the goal they set for themselves. The research study indicates that, according to the married women, the going to work and to study is not only for financial reasons but also for the fulfilment of the self and "to feel that I exist, am living and breathing", as one of the interviewees said. The single women assert that they go to work to buy personal goods and fashionable clothes, independent of their family.

In addition, the research study shows that the pressure of housework and the poor economic situation of Bedouin society are main factors that can cause the Bedouin woman to be denied her right to complete her studies. It must be noted here that although Israel has a Compulsory Education Law, which compels the

parents to send their daughters, as well as their sons, to study, Bedouin tradition does not allow this freedom. Randa says that, "Some of the parents did not heed this law and refused to send their daughters to learn."

The interviewees' statements indicate that they believe that this conflict between the old generation with the norms and the tradition and the new generation with education and modernization continues to exist. The older people want to preserve what remains of the Bedouin tradition. They are afraid that the women who go to study will be detrimentally influenced by the Western Israeli values and will adopt values of freedom and liberation of the woman, which are counter to Bedouin tradition. In addition, the older people do not want the young women to wear seductive pants or to know and speak Hebrew, which is not accepted by them.

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