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Bedouin Women In the Naqab: Interaction of Poverty, Marginalization and Gender discriminations

Background

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, the Arab population of Israel in 2010 is estimated at almost 1,6 Million, representing 20.4% of the population¹ The majority of these identify themselves as Arab Palestinian by nationality and Israeli by citizenship.² From this number, approximately 180,000 are Bedouins from the Naqab desert.

Among this population, 80,000 live in what is called, Unrecognized Villages, although these villages exist before the state establishment they are considered illegal settlements by the government. **Residents of those villages endure** an absence of basic infrastructure services, such as running water, electricity and sewage systems. Most villages lack schools, health clinics and access roads. The Naqab Bedouin has the highest rate of unemployment in the country, and the worst school retention and matriculation record. They struggle to cling to their traditional way of life, one that entails living in extended family and tribal structures and the herding of livestock for their sustenance, while the government seeks to herd them into pre-planned and inadequate urban townships that destroy the economical and social fabric of their community. The government has employed hostile tactics to bring about their transfer to these townships, including demolishing hundreds of homes every year they claim were built illegally.

Bedouin women are perhaps the most vulnerable to this situation as they are further constrained by the harsh patriarchal tradition of their community. This has implications in every aspect of women's lives. For example, the illiteracy rate in Unrecognized Villages for women above the age of 30 years, reaches 90% and the large majority is unable, unfit or forbidden or don't have the opportunity to work..

Thus, without education or employment, Bedouin women are denied any possibility for improving their own lives or exerting a positive impact on the lives of their families and their communities.

The History of Bedouin Education in the Naqab

In the Naqab desert, a school system existed already in the 1920's, far earlier than the State establishment in 1948. While an early system, it was for only boys from the elite, Sheiks sons mainly. The Ottoman Empire,

¹ [Latest population figures of Israel, 2010](#)

² [Identity crises Arab Citizens](#)

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collaboratively with parents, established it. Later during the British Mandate³, the schools number doubled, and they included schools for female students.

From 1949-1959 the state restricted the Naqab Bedouin's mobility, and the previous educational system almost disappeared entirely. From 1959-1969, the authorities marked fenced areas and forced the Bedouins to relocate, half of the previous schools only re-opened.

Only in the late 1970's did the State begin to implement its own compulsory education law among the Naqab Bedouins; to date, it is not fully implemented there and the educational services are of poor quality. The government began to implement the law as a "generous gift" for those who complied with the authorities and moved to the planned villages. Communities that did not comply, however received a collective punishment in the form of lack of education and other basic services.

Through the years, most elementary schools in the unrecognized villages, and high schools for the Naqab Bedouins, were enforced by court orders. Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights, has petitioned the High Court Justice in many cases, demanding to ensure education services.

Illiteracy among Women

Due to different geo-political conflicts, it took several decades for the State of Israel to open official schools in the Nagab "Negev". Only in the late 1970's was the first High School established. There is, therefore, a significant generational gap that lacks basic education and literacy skills. This gap is by far more significant among adult Bedouin women, as many men were still able to somehow receive a basic education through the local community or its social institutions or travel, while women remained marginalized and illiterate.

This places an enormous relevance on the need for adult women education and literacy training. Without this support, basic tasks such as going to the bank, attending a health care centre or a governmental office, voting, or accessing the labor market, are simply impossible to accomplish by an overwhelming group of Bedouin women.

Although the situation is slightly improving, illiteracy is still present among girls today, since many unrecognized villages don't have elementary schools and the dropout rate for girls is the highest in the country as the existing schools are inaccessible⁴. In a report prepared by Bar Ilan University in 1998⁵, it was found that the number of Bedouin girls who went to school in 1995 was only

³ Melitz, Amram, 1955, *Changes in the Bedouin Educational System*.

⁴ Isma'il Abu S'ad, 1997, *Bedouin Education in the Negev. Israel*, Background for Israeli Studies, Volume 2

⁵ Report No. 11, 1998, *Bedouin in the Negev - Education Budget*, Bar Ilan University, Research in Ethnic Education, April, 1999.

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44% of the total number of girls. Indicating, more than 50% of girls above 15 years are illiterate.

Findings from a recent survey conducted by the Galilee Society in 2009 indicated that the illiteracy rate among the Naqab Arab women ranges from 13.2% for women 35 to 39 years to 61.4% for women 50 to 59 years to 92.3 % 60 years and older **(See table 1)**

Table 1: Illiteracy Rates by Age Group amongst the Naqab Bedouin Women

| Range age (Years) | Illiteracy rate (%) |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 35-39 | 13.2 |
| 40-44 | 31.7 |
| 45-49 | 61.4 |
| 50-59 | 53.5 |
| 60+ | 92.3 |

These rates are closer to reality and they somewhat match the figures Sidreh found in

its surveys. Sidreh survey in 1999 showed that women illiteracy rate in the unrecognized villages was equal to their unemployment rate, 90%.

Intervention Projects and Recommendations

1. The role of the Third Sector: Joining Forces:

Many NGO sin the Naqab provide literacy classes for women, slightly reducing the illiteracy rate among them For example, Sidreh alone in its 12 years gave the opportunity to 1400 Bedouin woman to read and write .and they are another NGO

However, most of these organizations are proven unsuccessful, because of the following reasons:

1. Inadequate curriculum or methodology: service providers tend to use elementary school curriculums to teach adult women or they fail to adapt foreign curriculums that are alien and inaccessible to the target population.
2. Limited coverage and unscalable results; Together, these organizations work only in 25% of the 52 villages
3. High dependency on donations and external financial support, which leads to unsustainable or discontinued interventions
4. Lack of adequate facilities to conduct classes including limited access to ICTs (Information communication Technologies)
5. Lack of trained and qualified teaching team and teaching materials

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6. Lack of coordination and support from the Ministry of Education and/or local government educational offices.

From this study we concluded that intervention from the Third Sector can only be significant if A) it counts with an adequate and localized methodology, and B) if it is leveraged by government funding and support. Otherwise the qualitative and quantitative impact of the intervention of NGO's will always be limited.

What Sidreh has developed to counter these challenges is the establishment of the Forum for Adult Education for Bedouin Women, whereby 16 local and national organizations join efforts to reclaim girls' and women's right to education, while establishing a coherent platform to reduce illiteracy rates in a scalable fashion.

The forum's main objectives are, on one hand to generate an ongoing exchange of best practices, and methodology to ensure that a specialized adult education curriculum is constantly developed and updated according to the local culture, traditions and socio-economic particularities of the target population; and on the other hand, to advocate and influence public opinion on local and international levels to increase government participation and commitment.

In addition, our experience has taught us that it is key to address adult women education as part of an integral empowerment process that should include both psycho-social support—such as strengthening women's self esteem and increasing their communications and leadership skills—as well as economic and workforce development support. This support can be provided in the form of for example, vocational training, financial literacy and small business development.

2. Preventing girls from dropping out:

The alarming rates of girls' dropping out of school, especially in unrecognized villages are equally dramatic as the crisis in adult illiteracy, as this is the root of illiteracy of the new generation. The followings are our recommendations to address this critical issue:

- Increase access to early childhood education for young boys and girls in villages
- Increase access to high school education by adding high school classrooms at the elementary schools in villages
- build high schools in the unrecognized villages.
- Scholarships and other forms of financial assistance must be made available for boys and girls, with a focus on girls who forego learning due to their difficult financial situation. Such assistance must be the top priority of organizations and state institutions

11:00- 13:00 Minority women and girls and the right to education

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- Increase the awareness and involvement of local men as part of a patriarchal tradition.