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CHANGING FROM THE MARGINS: BEDOUIN WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

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Synopsis — The article critically examines how Bedouin women in the Negev talk about higher education. It is based on a qualitative study undertaken in 1998 to explore how 20 female Bedouin students in the Negev in Israel perceive their experience in third level studies. The discussion focuses on the ways Bedouin women use higher education as a vehicle to strengthen themselves and their community. I analyze the ways in which those who attain higher education resist and challenge their social position as Bedouin women. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

BETWEEN NOW AND THEN: BEDOUINS IN THE NEGEV[1] IN ISRAEL

> A story is always situated; it has both a teller and an audience. Its perspective is partial, and its telling is motivated. (Abu-Lughod, 1993, p. 15)

> During the early stage of Israel's statehood, the schools introduced by the Israeli government were viewed by the Bedouin as an intrusion that was not relevant to their way of life. As time passed and people began to adapt to their new reality, they saw the importance of education and began to demand educational services. (Abu-Saad et al., 1998, p. 349)

The Bedouin community is among the population of indigenous Palestinian Arabs who remained in Israel after 1948 (Abu-Saad, 2001). The Bedouin Community in the Negev comprises numerous tribes; they constitute a minority group in Israel and are not allowed to choose whether to live in traditional settlements or towns (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Abu-Saad, 2001; Fenster, 1999). For the past five decades, since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Bedouin—whose lands have been confiscated by the Israelis—have been subjected to a process of change by the Israeli government, which began implementing plans to resettle the Negev Bedouin population in seven officially recognized Bedouin localities in the early 1970s (Abu-Saad, 1995; Fenster, 1995, 1999). About half of the 120,000 Bedouin in the Negev live in the seven government-built towns: Rahat, Lakia, Tel-Sheva, Kessifa, Aruar, Segev Shalom, and Hura (Fenster, 1999). More than 50,000 Bedouins live in scattered settlements that are considered illegal by the authorities. The Statistical Yearbook of the Negev Bedouin (1999) calls the settlements "unrecognized Bedouin localities" or the "diaspora."

The transformation from traditional living patterns to those of an urban society and from nomadism to diverse forms of settlement has brought with it shifts in economic patterns, gender roles, and attitudes toward education (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Abu-Saad, 1991, 2001; Ankar, 1995; Ben-David, 1993; Boneh, 1988, 1993; Glubman & Katz, 1998; Pessate-Schubert, 2000a; Weisen, 1997). This, in turn, has had an enormous impact on Bedouin women in particular. Moreover, these changes have led to the growing dependence of the Bedouin community on the Israeli labor market.

As both Bedouin and women, Bedouin women are considered a doubly marginalized minority (Abu-Saad, 1995, 1997; Fenster, 1999; Tal, 1993). As Bedouins, they belong to a minority population that does not enjoy full civic equality in a society where the majority is Jewish and, as females, they are marginalized in a community where women in general do not have full equality (Abu-Rabia, 2000). In the case of Bedouin women, it is crucial to under-

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standing the wider context in which women's status has changed (Tal, 1993). Mernissi (1987) addresses the issue of women, change, and education and states that the time factor is crucial in that context in the Muslim world:

> Access to education seems to have an immediate, tremendous impact on women's perception of themselves, their reproductive and sexual roles, and their social mobility expectations. (Mernissi, 1987, p. xxv)

The main reason for this, she states, is that most educated Muslim women have illiterate mothers. It is equally true for educated Bedouin women in the Negev (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Abu-Saad et al., 1998). The number of literate men and women in the Bedouin community in the Negev is low, largely because education has not been a high priority for them. As a nomadic society, their way of life has required other skills (Abu-Ajaj & Ben-David, 1988; Abu-Saad, 2001; Meir & Barnea, 1986). The issue of girls' attendance in school must be understood in that context. In a comprehensive survey of education in Bedouin society, Abu-Saad (1995) claims that, traditionally, Bedouin society has been in no hurry to send girls to school. Girls were often taken out of school at an early age because their parents saw no benefit in further education for them. However, these traditional attitudes of the Negev Bedouin toward the education of their children, especially their daughters, have changed in light of the new context in which this community now finds itself. Nowadays, the options and decisions that young women and their families take are quite different than those taken by their parents (Abu-Saad et al., 1998; Alat'ona, 1993).

A change took place after the establishment of the Jewish state (Abu-Saad, 2001; Al-Haj, 1996; Ganam, 1998; Herzog, 1999; Mar'i & Mar'i, 1991), when education became a key issue on the political agenda of the Palestinian community in Israel. Mar'i and Mar'i (1991) claim that:

> Education gained popularity as instrumental for accelerating modernity and thus became central in the consciousness of Arabs in Israel. This set in motion the forces that propelled the development of future challenges. (Mar'i & Mar'i, 1991, pp. 214–215)

For Arabs, in general, and the Bedouin, in particular, educated people can bring about change in their communities. In that sense, education replaces the land that they lost, as argued by Ganam (1998). It is a source of pride and income and enhances the strong link between knowledge and power. Nowadays, in light of the social process that Bedouin society in the Negev is undergoing, formal education is clearly more important than in the past. The issue of education in the Palestinian community in Israel in the context of change and/or the mechanism of state control has been discussed in other works (such as Abu-Rabia, 2001; Al-Haj, 1996). However, as far as I know, no work has been done specifically on Bedouin women in the Negev in that context.[2] This article aims to further explore the question of education, power, and change in the Bedouin community and may provide some answers to gaps in our knowledge about how Bedouin women in the Negev live, think, and feel about themselves and the opportunities they have had in light of their culture and tradition.

SPATIAL BOUNDARIES AND EDUCATION

> Traditionally, sociology has divided itself between studies of the public (work, public policy, government) and the private sphere, (home, family), failing to explore the private in the public or the public in the private. (Lohan, 2000, p. 109)

Domestic space has traditionally defined and perpetuated social relations between men and women (Slymovics, 1996). Society's spatial arrangements and the problematic status of women explain their entry into the public sphere as an intrusion, disturbing the equilibrium of traditional boundaries between men and women (Badran, 1995; Helman & Rappoport, 1997; Landes, 1998). Although the separation between the private and public spheres acts as a mechanism to block changes for gender equality, feminist researchers such as Walby (1997) have recognized that the division between the private and the public is not so clear-cut. Walby (p. 1) argues that the "system of gender relations is changing from one which was based on women being largely confined to the domestic sphere, to one in which women are present in the public sphere..." Walby argues further that, in the 19th century, patriarchy was "private" (women were oppressed in the private domain), while in the 20th century, patriarchy was "public" (women were oppressed by the state and its institutions). With regard to Arab women, discussion of their domesticity is the focus of many studies (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Sabbagh, 1996; Slymovics, 1996). However, different from one

another Arab women may be, domestic space has traditionally defined and perpetuated social relations between men and women.

What is happening in the Bedouin community in the Negev? Although there has been an increase in the number of investigations of the ways in which Bedouin women in the Negev in Israel participate in the public sphere (such as Abu-Saad et al., 1998; Fenster, 1999; Tal, 1993), a survey of the literature reveals that no investigations have been conducted on the meaning educated women attribute to higher education in the course of their lives. Access to knowledge is of great relevance in gender-segregated societies, where separation between men and women is characterized by a separation in their cultural and social knowledge (Altorki & El-Solh, 1988). In this context, it is important to explore what role education plays for Bedouin women, who are traditionally identified with the private sphere. In other words, how private and public spaces are reconciled within the private sphere (home and family) and especially how these educated women achieve this.

In an official letter, Dr. Al Krenawi, Head of the Center for Research of Bedouin Society at Ben-Gurion University, states that, in the 2001/2002 academic year, there were 363 Bedouin students at this University. Of these, 146 were female and 217 were male. By comparison, 10 years ago, there were only 163 Bedouin students, of whom 8 were women. The increase in the number of Bedouin women from the Negev obtaining a higher education (Elgazi, 2001; Zuriel-Harrari, 2001) challenges the status quo.

As stated by Freire (Shor & Freire, 1990, p. 24), education is strongly linked to power, where knowledge allows people to posses "power of" rather than "power over" (Yuval-Davis, 1994, p. 180). In this context, empowerment becomes a central issue. Yuval-Davis (1994) addresses ways in which empowerment breaks down boundaries between the public and the private spheres and allows for the personal to connect to the communal. The question of inclusion and exclusion of women from the public sphere should be studied by tracing the social processes and practices organizing women's everyday experiences (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Helman & Rappoport, 1997; Rappoport, Penaso, & Garabi, 1995; Slymovics, 1996).

In this article, I show how education has given Bedouin women new knowledge about their own experiences and how this knowledge could be empowering for them. I aim to understand how gender identities are being reconstructed due to women's access to education and how education enables them to create their own space within the private and public domains.

There are several factors that have a negative impact on women's education, such as parents' literacy rates, low enrollment, and the gender gap. Available research on education of girls and women in the Arab world (e.g., Harfoush-Strickland, 1996) reveals various factors that hinder women's access to education, such as unavailability of schools for females only, lack of female teachers, lack of transportation to and from schools, and different expectations from males and females. It is particularly interesting to note that despite these factors, the women have succeeded in acquiring a higher education. Moreover, they are in the public sphere without the direct supervision of a family member. This is in contrast to professional literature, which has presented the Bedouin woman from the Negev as largely dependent on the males in her family (Abu-Saad et al., 1998; Adler, 1995; Elgazi, 2001; Tal, 1993). One should remember that, despite the increase in the number of Bedouin women in higher education, the pursuit of higher education is not common. Moreover, the beginning of a trend in that direction is tied in with the overall changes that Bedouin society is undergoing.

ZOOMING IN: A JEWISH WOMAN RESEARCHES EDUCATED BEDOUIN WOMEN

I remember the times I would go on outings with my parents, back in the early 1970s. I would press my face to the window of the car and gaze out at a little girl leading a flock of sheep to pasture—my first encounter with a Bedouin. From those fleeting encounters, though few and far between, she remained etched in my memory—beautiful, independent, walking with the flock. To this day, I remember how I turned my head to gaze at her, the Bedouin girl, until she disappeared from sight, leaving only a cloud of dust in her wake. Sometimes, we would travel for hours without coming across her. I never stopped to ask her name. I never visited her house. I ran into her on the roadsides, in the open spaces. She fascinated me. Afterwards, I continued to look for the girl who had grown up and become a young woman. In the meantime, I also became a woman, obtained a university education, and began a career in academia. Where is the Bedouin girl of yesteryear today? She is not on the roadside. She is not leading a flock of sheep. Today, I encounter her and her friends on the paths of the campus, in the

classrooms, the library, and the computer rooms. It's the same girl. It's not the same space.

This article has brought me back to the "field" of the Bedouin girl, only this time I am more mature and critical of what Edward Said refer to as 'the Orient' (Said, 2000)—not romantic but critical. Being critical of the ideology of Orientalism shifts my position from being a "victim" of Orientalism. Once I became conscious of the fact that I was captured in the 'prison' imposed on me by the Western order I realized the artificial distinction between 'the Orient' and the 'Occident' (Said, 2000). Studying Bedouin women's lives through this new prism makes me as critical of my culture as well. It is now that I reconstruct the prism through which I research Bedouin women and position them in the center of their narratives as the doers rather than as passive participants in my work. Grounding my study in women's experience, I am obliged to elicit their narratives and explain them as they have expressed them. Yet, these stories are structured, having been produced under specific academic conditions. In Abu-Lughod's words:

> I selected the stories and wove them into a pattern on the basis of a conjunction between Bedouin women's interests in and attention to certain issues and the salience of these issues for specific audiences in the West. (Abu-Lughod, 1993, p. 16)

Thus, the stories I have gathered through my research have been mediated by me, a Jewish woman from the Israeli academia. Moreover, my background as a Mizrahi[3] woman who grew up in a small town in the Negev in Israel has had an impact on my reading of the narratives. Altorky and El-Solh claim:

> . . .that social scientists themselves are cultural beings whose backgrounds greatly influence the data they gather. (Altorki & El-Solh, 1988, p. 1)

I chose to study the significance of higher education for Bedouin women because of three converging elements: women, higher education, and Israeli society (Pessate-Schubert, 1996, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). The choice of researching social phenomena close to home, rather than in far-off foreign cultures, is a core aspect of contemporary anthropology.

I have sought ways of giving the Bedouin women's experience a voice in feminist sociological discourse. From a feminist standpoint, narratives offer a number of important methodological benefits for women who are considered to be marginal (Al-Nowaihi, 2001). Firstly, storytelling allows the Bedouin women to reflect on their life experience (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Abu-Rabia, 2000; Pessate-Schubert, 2000a, 2000b). Secondly, narratives allow marginalized women to make their private story public (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Pessate-Schubert, 1999, 2000c). Thirdly, these narratives subvert the dominant story, which is socially constructed by the community or the state (Anthias, 2002; Lomsky-Feder, 1999; Maynes, 1989). Finally, storytelling can be very empowering both for these women and for their community (Mar'i & Mar'i, 1991; Mulqueen, 1992). In light of these issues, I have tried to stay as faithful as possible to the original tone of their voices. I am aware that some people may perceive this paper as representing a dialogue between oppressor and oppressed; however, I would suggest that retelling their story does the opposite. How complete would our picture of Bedouin female students' education be, were we to rely only on the "dominant" (community or state) discourse? I believe my article presents yet another voice and that the voice of the students is heard and interpreted with the necessary attention to the power relationship between researcher and participants. Moreover, this article addresses the lives of Bedouin students who are often the objects of our research and yet are either silenced or absent from the higher-educational discourse. By exploring their narratives, capturing their stories, and hearing their voices, I gained insight into how they understood their own educational experience as well as that of other Bedouin female students. This point is important for the discussion presented here, as I intend to explore how the status of the Bedouin woman is changing alongside other changes taking place in her society.

LISTEN TO THE VOICES: BEDOUIN WOMEN TALK OF THEIR EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

> We often hear and read about women's marginalization, women's deprivation, and women's exclusion from modernity in the Third World. (Mernissi, 1987, p. xxviii)

Presented here are seven in-depth interviews carried out between January and November 1998, through which I collected life stories of Bedouin women attending colleges and universities, whom I chose using the snowball method (Paton, 1990). Students were identified through different Bedouin people I had

met through two different social networks. The first is the Alon Association, for which I have been working as a volunteer in El Atrash, an unrecognized Bedouin locality. Through my work with teachers, parents, and young people from the community, I have come to know Bedouin men and women, many of whom have become my friends. They helped me to locate participants according to criteria I had established: Participants should be Bedouin women living in the Negev and studying at an institute of higher education (a college or university) in Israel. The second social network is a group of Bedouin students whom I knew from my work as a lecturer at a teaching college in Israel. They helped me in locating additional students.

Participants came from various disciplines: education, medicine, nursing, geography, chemistry, Middle Eastern Studies, and so forth. Usually, most Bedouin women study "practical" subjects to better aid their entrance into the public sphere and head changes in their community. These young women were in their 20s, unmarried, and pioneers in their communities as far as attaining higher education is concerned. Some of the participants live in government-built towns, while others reside in so-called "spontaneous settlements."

Their stories were related in an open interview, revealing their personal perspectives on their lives and different aspects of everyday reality (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991). Narrative allows the Bedouin women to make their stories public. In other words, telling stories of their experience as educated women allows them to reposition themselves in relation to their community—a step they would not otherwise take. Hence, in that sense, storytelling is empowering and transformative (Ferna'ndez, 2002, p. 48). Each interview took place at a location of the participant's choice, usually her home or the university or college campus. Having been assured of confidentiality, all of the women agreed to have the interviews tape-recorded. All the names used in this paper have consequently been changed.

All the profiles described here were composed with responses to one universal request made of all interviewees: "Tell me about yourself," while the respondents were aware that the key issues in question concerned the significance of higher education in the course of their lives. Each narrative has its own natural tempo of the flow of events as the teller chose to evoke them. Although the students' mother tongue is Arabic, the interviews were conducted in Hebrew; the relevant parts of the narratives have been translated into English for this article. The narratives are presented as they were told: some in very informal and at times incorrect language. It should be noted that Hebrew is the main language in Israel and, although both are official languages of the State, Arabic is not so widely known. This is problematic because while most participants may be fluent in Hebrew, I am not fluent in Arabic. Nevertheless, most of the literature on the Bedouins in Israel is in Hebrew. I assume that this might have political significance since the community being studied—the Bedouins—is actually being observed and studied in a language that is not their own. Little, if any, literature in Arabic is available to the Bedouin community in Israel about their own culture, economy, education, and social life, including material written by Bedouin scholars. Publishing in Hebrew is yet another mechanism of state control over the Bedouin minority.

There are differences between the chronology in which participants related their narratives and the order in which the material is presented in this article. Selected passages have been quoted here out of chronological context and solely in the context of the data processing and analysis. In this sense, this process focuses on the significance of the implications exposed by the teller. By deciphering the practice of higher education, I clarified key issues tied to the establishment of Bedouin feminine identity in its cultural context. Such a focus made it possible to single out two central issues of gender and cultural–national identity: higher education as one of the unique arenas where feminine identity is examined and the contribution of female students to the changing image of their community.

The analysis was carried out on three levels (Lomsky-Feder, 1994; Pessate-Schubert, 1999, 2000a):

The single narrative—a search for central themes and an analysis of them within the context of the overall life course of the women;
The stories as a whole—analysis of the major themes characterizing all the stories collected; and
The cultural level—analysis of the life stories as a whole within the context of Bedouin society in Israel.

'EVERYTHING GETS MIXED UP'

> ...Identity is not one thing for any individual; rather, each individual is both located in, and opts for a number of differing, and at times, conflictual, identities, depending on the social, political, economic and ideological aspects of their situation. (Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994, p. 9)

Lila Suddenly I am exposed to Israeli society and everything gets mixed up. Everything.

> How did my friend put it? I'm on the border and I don't know where I am.

Any researcher dealing with the growing number of female Bedouins in colleges and universities in Israel must remember that they attend an Israeli Jewish campus. In other words, these women experience their new location as Bedouin women attending a Jewish campus. Take the Memorial Day Ceremony[4] for example. What do they think about on this day? Do they feel part of it? Do they think about Jewish dead soldiers or about Palestinian dead children and soldiers? How do they position themselves in relation to Memorial Day? Do they draw a boundary between themselves and the Jewish people?

Precisely because of such issues, it is my concern, as a researcher, to study my own position and that of the participants. On campus, they meet Jewish women whose lives are different from theirs; nevertheless, it is they (the Bedouin) who are usually considered to be the "other"—being Bedouin and Muslim. Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler (2002, p. 331) state that:

> It is not just political values that affect the ways people draw collective boundaries. It is also their differential positioning in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and other social divisions.

Location and borders are central to the narratives presented here. Take Lila's use of "border" as an example. She conveys her wish to belong to her community, yet she feels that the symbolic "border guards" (Armstrong, 1982) of her Bedouin identity vanish as she is exposed to the Israeli culture. She gets lost. Being exposed to Israeli society, she questions her traditional position as a "border guard" of her Bedouin collective. She is not sure anymore if her cultural borders are well defined. Moreover, acquiring higher education and being exposed to Israeli society cause her to question her new position as a Bedouin female. She positions herself in three different, yet connected circles: Bedouin, gender, and nationality. In doing so, she questions her position in all three arenas. In this context, we need to consider two issues: the marginality of the Bedouin community in Israeli society and the marginality of Bedouin women in their own community as put by Lila:

> Until I began to study, I felt everything was OK, relative to a lot of women in my society. Very good. But as I began to be exposed to Jewish society, it also gave me a feeling that I was missing a lot of things in my life.

One cannot help but hear the pain in Lila's narrative, which appears to be twofold: firstly, her realization that her position as a Bedouin woman is not as good as she thought and, secondly, her understanding that her community lags behind Israeli society. While she does not say so explicitly, she certainly implies it through her reflective stance—once as a woman and again as a Bedouin: "relative to a lot of women in my society." Her encounter with male and female Jewish students on campus has enabled her to see and feel how different she is. Lila weaves her personal and communal change through her status in Israeli society—and she does not seem to like what she sees. Neither do some of the other women.

This is evident from Nur's words, when I asked her about her knowledge of the university on the first day. She then positioned herself in relation to the Jewish majority. The dominant Jewish narrative served as her prism for her new reality.

> Not everyone is able to get into the university. Someone with high grades, a high score on the psychometric exam,[5] and also age is a condition for them.

Interviewer What do you mean by age?

Nur Twenty-one is when you can apply to the university. Not to everything, but to most of the departments. Everyone knows that they have nothing to do at the age of eighteen, just sit at home and wait until they're twenty-one. They don't go to work like Jewish women.

Interviewer Do you think that there is a difference between Jewish women and women who are not Jewish?

Nur Yes, yes, sure. Jews must go to the army. Everyone goes when they are eighteen. They go for three years until the age of twenty-one. That's it, we don't go to the army, just sit and wait.

Interviewer Wait for what?

Nur Wait until we are twenty-one.

Nur, who is almost 19, is nonetheless at university, yet she uses the issue of age to express how different her experience is. In general, Bedouin men serve in the army. Bedouin women do not. Nur talks about being different in Israeli society by addressing two key issues that are central to the Israeli and Jewish narrative: the army and university. As a Bedouin

woman—and not only that, but also a Bedouin woman in Israeli society—she senses that she is out of time with the majority. Like Lila, Nur uses the narrative of the dominant culture to explain her experience. Taking the army and higher education as central to the lives of Israeli Jews, she differentiates between self and other. Iman adds:

> I don't know how to explain it, but in our society we have many more customs that are difficult for women. Even though our society keeps developing all the time, still there are these customs. . . .There are limits, lots of them.

Again, I learn how Iman, like her friends, draws her gender, ethnicity, and nationality in relation to others—the Jews. Needless to say, they value the benefits of acquiring an education. Talking about their positive experience in the university emphasizes their changing social place within their community. Nur and Iman are examples of how cultural limits have not left them behind. Studying is a practice allowing Bedouin women to be more independent. In that sense, this cross-cultural encounter allows both sides to be "different" as Nur further emphasizes:

> Our relationships are very good [Bedouin and Jews]. We are treated well. Also, when I started the university I thought myself to be a stranger, but the truth is that students and professors treat us well.

Lila, Nur, Iman, and their friends show how they consider themselves to be different by expressing their "surprise" at being treated like everyone else, rather than as the "other." The use of phrases, such as "treat us well," emphasizes their acceptance of their status as Bedouin. They feel different in their own community because they are at university and they feel different at university because they are Bedouin. Even though Nur and her friends talk about themselves being different, they seem to use this difference as best they can for their own benefit. They explain their marginality as an advantage: being educated allows them to participate in the public sphere, to raise political, gender, and cultural issues which were out of their "territory" before attending institutes of higher education. Iman relates to these issues:

> It is enough to go out studying. Going out. That I can count on myself in the future. This is very important.

The implication is that these women do not make an either/or decision (Woollett, Marshall, Nicolson, & Dosanjh, 1994, p. 119) about whether or not to retain their cultural tradition. Their transition from one identity—Bedouin—to another—Bedouin female students—is fluid and varying. They resist their social place and explain how education serves as a vehicle for personal and communal changes.

I will now consider two core narratives: personal and communal changes. This is followed by some more specific examples of the ways these women experience, understand and interpret higher education.

BECAUSE I AM IMPORTANT IN LIFE. . .

> And women all over the world know very well how important power fantasies are to one's self-empowerment. (Mernissi, 1987, p. x)

The focus in this section is on how the participants talk about their way of structuring their gender identity in light of their new path. Sara describes the link between obtaining education and establishing her status as a woman:

> More people are studying, and this, everyone is already studying. . . .I will tell you when Bedouin women will really be women: when the whole population will study. The more that Bedouin women study, the better it is for them, for their status.

As she explains, it is important for everyone to study, but women should definitely study. It is interesting to see how Sara is not talking in the singular but in the plural. Moreover, when she talks about the importance of education she talks about herself. As a woman, I was curious to understand her statement "when the Bedouin woman will be a woman" and what it has to do with being educated. These issues are further clarified and amplified when Sara continues.

Sara — You know, someone who goes out and sees the world, the world sees them, too.

Interviewer — An interesting statement. What do you mean?

Sara — I mean that's [education] most important for me. I sat at home for a year and a half, and it was very hard for me. I didn't study, I didn't work. Didn't do anything. I felt neglected, that no one knows me and I don't know anyone. The world does not

> know me. I went out. I said, "That's it. I want to study" and everyone in the family told me, "Go study. Go out and study." With us [her family], all of the women work. All are teachers. My father said, "Go learn, go do something." . . . Someone who goes out to study is important, and is really respected.

For women like Sara, achieving a higher education means going out and touching the world, seeing and being seen in three spaces: private, public, and national. Through education, women gain respect, change their status, and, hopefully, take an active part in reconstructing their society. Dora explores this issue further in response to my next question:

Interviewer Describe for me how you feel you have changed during your studies.
Dora Yes, a lot. It is as if from the period of high school until now it has changed a lot. The way I speak. The way I dress. The way I behave. A lot, a lot has truly changed.
Interviewer Do you like the change?
Dora Yes, believe me. The way I look at girls who don't study among us in the village. It is different. The way I speak to them, they don't speak on such a level. I am not saying I speak on a high level, but more or less—I know how to speak, because I hear a lot of people who talk, and I learn too. So I know. . . . I have other things from life than what I was. Like I was a small child and now I'm an adult. I really matured at the university.

Mobility and personal growth are highlighted through the comparison these women make with their friends who do not attend university or college. Taken together, the narratives of Lila, Sara and Dora suggest that if a Bedouin woman wants to see and be seen, she has to study. Education is their vehicle for change and growth.

The combination of education and their changing status as women sheds new light on "old" issues such as their gender role and future marriage and motherhood. While some reject their domestic gender role, others reinforce their position as future wives and mothers. Samira relates to the importance of attending higher education in relation to herself as a woman at home:

> It's important. Terribly important. Why? Because in the past women did not go out to study and work. Then the house wasn't clean as it is today. The house wasn't in the state it is today. The children going to school weren't clean. They didn't do their homework. There were cases when a girl went out or one girl in the house went out to study, she turned the house upside down. . ..

Lila adds:

> . . .The most important thing is that girls will study because they become mothers. And an educated mother is a whole different story, it is much better. You agree with me, don't you?

In the latter case, women use knowledge in order to educate the next generation, which is the one to benefit, and contribute to their community at the same time. Basit (1997) argues that the personal lives of Arab women and, in particular, Bedouin women are articulated in the context of their families and their communities. Therefore, when these women speak about how their studies contribute to their position in their families and communities, they take a huge leap differentiating between their social lives and their familial roles. Lila addresses this issue:

> I have a good friend [Jewish] and I tell him personal stuff. I never did so before, but with him it is different. I feel very comfortable with him, so I tell him about things that bother me. I never did so before.

She goes on to explain that the fact that she is a student has a great impact on the kind of person she is.

Is this really a change? Is this what feminists wish for? That is not the point. What is important is that for these women, personal change at home can and will create further change—in the family unit and, consequently, in the community. The woman is part of the family and the family is part of the community, and any change in her role, attitude, and reality has a great impact on her environment (Sabbagh, 1996). From this standpoint, these women see themselves as women activists, taking part in the changes their society is undergoing, as Lila explains:

> . . .Most mothers cannot read and write. An educated mother would help. . .It also reinforces her children's self-confidence.

Lila speaks of mothers who can read, which might raise the question of whether women are educated solely to be better mothers and wives (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Elor, 1993). However, having read it this way, I

maintain my position as the oppressor and Lila's position as the oppressed. Sabbagh (1996, p. xv) claims that when Western women ask the question, "Why can't Arab women be more like us?" what they mean is, why can they not be more individual as opposed to being a part of their extended family.

LIKE IF I GET AHEAD IN SOCIETY...

Tamra Now it is changing, like now girls study. In this generation that was born after the 1970s, it is changing. The woman who is educated since then, she thinks from the start, my son will be this way, I don't know, will be, say, a lawyer, and my daughter will be a doctor and will be this and that. So like it changes. Now the girls start with education. They explain how important it is to study. The most important is the girls.

The way Bedouin society in Israel is changing, particularly with regard to education, affords women an opportunity to grow, change and enter the public arena, and influence the way their collective is changing. Hoisting the banner of change, women like Tamra receive legitimization to act in spheres to which they had previously been denied access on normative grounds. Tamra ties together a number of core issues when she speaks about the significance of higher education for herself and her community. For women like her, education is at the center of any discourse about girls and women. Tamra knows it, other Bedouin women know it, and maybe, most importantly, Bedouin society knows it. Marginality is no longer an issue, in the sense that their status is changing. Abu-Lughod (1998, p. xx) addresses the issue of having to understand that when writing about women in Arab societies, their strength rather than their marginalization should be recognized. Thus, unlike their mothers, Bedouin women are now able to make their own contribution to their community and at the same time to place the issue of women's equality on the public agenda. No doubt, then, that for the participants, education has been transformative, especially through activities such as writing, reading public speaking, and moving away from their communities. Dalila presents a similar attitude:

> Like, if I get ahead in society and I have some sort of status, I can contribute more, sort of to give. You know what education is. It isn't that the whole personality is built on this, you know, like if I hadn't studied, then my situation would be harder. I would sit at home, get married ... children, raise children... wait for my husband. Like I am not there. Like God created me in order to bear children, prepare food, clean, wait for my husband—like to speak, to hear, not exist. All this isn't...there is nothing like learning.

Two succinct sentences—"Like I am not there" and "There is nothing like learning"—epitomize how Dalila sees herself changing not only in personal but also in communal terms. While higher education is her vehicle to a better future, "being visible" in her community is her primary goal for the present. Even though the women in this study are familiar with the taken-for-granted assumption about the binary world that identifies the private sphere with women and the public sphere with men (Herzog, 1994; Pessate-Schubert, 1999), they perceive higher education as a means of rewriting their position in the public arena as well. Samira relates to this issue and talks about literate women who vote on election day:

> Once you are educated, know how to write and read you choose how to vote.

No doubt, voting is one of the civil rights on these women's agenda and they appreciate its importance. For a Westerner, this might look odd; however, for a Bedouin woman, talking about change at home reveals a whole new set of concepts and attitudes towards gender roles, female status in the community, and other issues. For these women, this is what education does—it promotes change "inside" (at home) and "outside" (in the community). These two spheres cannot be separated. Moving back and forth between home and community enhances their personal growth and gives them new opportunities, which in return blur the division between private and public.

These women put themselves at the center of their narratives. In doing so, they reveal the transformation in status that Bedouin women have undergone—from women who did not take part in the public side of their lives to active partners in the process of change. Sara relates to this issue when she talks about how she sees Bedouin women in the new millennium (as stated, the interviews were conducted in 1998):

> Next millennium, I tell you, maybe in six years, the Bedouin woman will be a real woman. Now people see that she studies and that she knows and understands life. So [it will be] when all women go to school and get a job, change their environment. The Bedouin woman today is in a different, better place than in the past, but not as a woman should really be.

In other words, being more educated than ever allows Bedouin women to move from being excluded from to being included in their community, because they can participate and take action. It is important to emphasize that these women do not wish to leave their community. On the contrary, they seek to deepen their ties and especially to bolster their role in it in very practical ways. Here is what Iman says:

> I have come back to my village. I went out, studied and worked; now I have to come back, to give back, and to help others in my village. I am the first academic woman from my village. The first from the girls, and if I do not come back and help and tell about the university how would they know? There is so much work to do. Believe me. My sisters finished studying and they work. I helped them. I showed them how to fill the forms. Now they work, make changes, earn money.

The participants challenge gender roles in their community by presenting themselves as working women who earn money and support their families just as men do. For them and for their community this is a real change and a huge step towards putting Bedouin women in a position of power within their community. Nur explains:

> I want to work and do everything that I have learned in the university for my society.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING FROM THE MARGINS

> It's my life, so I'll do what I want. . .Right? (Lewis, 1993)

> While changes in the position of women in Arab Israeli society are easily observable. . . the processes and dynamics underlying these changes are subtle and less evident. (Mar'i and Mar'i, 1991, p. 213)

This is the story of bright young Bedouin female students who talk about the meaning of higher education in the context of their lives. This story is not about marginalized and deprived women excluded from modernity. It is about women's strength, aspirations, and new opportunities. It is about education, empowerment, and change. These women belong to a new generation, the first to embrace education, and hence they experience the burden of the inter-generational gap. Even though these women are still a minority within Bedouin society, they focus on their strength and desire for change and growth, rather than on oppression.

In analyzing the stories of these educated Bedouin women, I have invited readers to go one step beyond defining their role in the private sphere and towards accepting their voice of social mobility and resistance to their traditional social place. This article has shown how higher education contributes to the changing status of Bedouin women in two areas: personal and communal. On the one hand, I have shown how these women perceive education to be a vehicle towards personal growth and, on the other, I have explored the ways these women present education as something that connects the private and public spheres. For them, education expands their social space and gender equality both within the family and outside of it. Studying and being outside the home expands their social world. Furthermore, post high-school studies increase their attractiveness as brides.

The strength of these women's narratives lies in growth emanating from within, founded on the potential of Bedouin women and Bedouin society. Higher education is indeed outside their world and tradition. However, they are facing new opportunities, making new decisions, and changing perceptions. The Bedouin women I have known show resistance to their traditional social place in their community, using education as the tool of this resistance. They still build their lives around their domestic domain, but now things are different. Their lives are not only private. Today, younger educated Bedouin women build their lives around the opportunities—within cultural limits—preparing themselves through education to enter the labor market and receive a salary. Some of them delay marriage and childbirth; others use their educational skills to benefit their families.

These narratives intersect with two structural changes, firstly, in the gender regime and, secondly, in the position of the Bedouin community in Israel. Educated Bedouin women today are better able to decide how to balance their commitment to education and employment than their mothers were. The Bedouin community faces new paths in the Israeli context. As stated by the participants, they want to be perceived by Israeli society as educated and equal.

Today, throughout the Intifada,[6] the unique relationship with the Israeli authorities has been maintained since Bedouin men serve in the Israeli army. Yet the Bedouin community has felt that there is a huge gap between them and the wider Israeli society. Acquiring higher education only reinforces this notion; nevertheless, it does give the Bedouin the

opportunity to narrow this gap (Zuriel-Harrari, 2001).

Two central metaphors are inherent in these narratives: Growth and borders. ''Growth''—as I call it—indicates the long passage each Bedouin student and her community have gone through; access to education seems to have had an immediate, tremendous impact on their perception of themselves and their community. ''Borders''—as mentioned by Lila—points to the meaning these women attribute to their new reality (as students) and to their construction of a new identity by crossing back and forth between the private and the public sphere, between the Bedouin community and the wider Israeli society. Mar'i and Mar'i (1991, p. 217) consider these issues and claim that once this process has taken place, the role of Arab women changes from that of culture preserver to that of culture transformer.

Accordingly, these women normalize higher education into their lives. When they do so, they report that education is part of their own reality and that of their community. They use education to mark their new position within their community and in relation to it. Thus, they report that they are educated women who are now ''insiders''—part of the public sphere of the Bedouin community. From this new location, education is widely perceived as an agent for the empowerment of women (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Jayaweera, 1997; Mar'i & Mar'i, 1991; Sabbagh, 1996).

The core narrative in these biographies symbolizes the path each woman has chosen to take in her new course of life. In other words, throughout their stories, the students evaluate their situation as women and as Bedouins simultaneously and, while they are aware of the change in their personal status, they cannot separate the discussion of being inferior as women from the discussion of being inferior as Bedouin. When they talk about the ways being a woman, it is intertwined with being a Bedouin. For them, a sense of identity is a sense that one's life is meaningful and that one has power over it.

Gender roles and expectations have been undergoing a substantive change among the Bedouins in the Negev over the last 10 years (Abu-Saad, 1995; Pessate-Schubert, 2000a; Tal, 1993). The women presented in this article provide us with the context in which to view this process. Via their new status as students, they are ''doing'' something to change their world. Throughout this process, they grow and cross borders, negotiate, and participate within their community. As such, they value the ''public'' and the ''private'' differently than before, governed by a different logic of action and attitudes. If previously these two spheres were separated, they are now interwoven and any change in one impacts the other. These women as a group may now demand action on their behalf.

Western feminism is grounded in Western thought, ideology, and values, whereas the Arab woman's struggle is grounded in Arab thought (Altorki & El-Solh, 1988; Melman, 1995, 1998; Mernissi, 1987). It is important to carve out a space for discourse on Bedouin women that can accommodate their own narratives and interpretations regarding their changing status within their community. Within the ''dominant narrative,'' one should read the ''personal narratives'' in which women present the unique feminine identity they have forged. Higher education, in this case, has structured feminine identity within the Bedouin culture as an avenue for reconstructing the collective from within. In this process, the cultural story is not *the only story*, but rather one of the many stories representing Bedouin community.

ENDNOTES

1. The desert-like Negev is in the south of Israel and, according to the Statistical Yearbook of the Negev Bedouin (1999), is home to the majority of Bedouins in Israel.
2. To the best of my knowledge, there are only two papers on education and women in the Bedouin community in the Negev. The first is an unpublished master's thesis written in Hebrew by Abu-Rabia (2000). The second is an article written by Kasem (2002), which was published in Hebrew. Both authors are doctoral students at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel.
3. Israeli Jews of Asian/African origin. This might be equivalent of 'people of color,'
4. A special Day marked on the Jewish calendar to remember the soldiers who died in combat.
5. In order to be admitted to university, students have to pass the psychometric entrance examination. The higher one's grades are, the better one's chances are to be accepted to a prestigious faculty.
6. The Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories.

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