

The Women of the Negev: Testimony from Representatives of a Bedouin Women's Organisation



Photo credit: Sidreh-Lakiya

The Bedouins of the Negev desert are one of the most disadvantaged minorities within Israel. Numbering between 160,000 and 180,000 people, they are systematically excluded from Israeli society and denied the rights and standard of living enjoyed by the majority population. Approximately half of the Bedouin population lives in “unrecognised” villages (approximately 45),

while the remainder lives in the 7 government-planned villages that have been established since 1968¹ and the 9 villages which have been “recognised” by the government since 1999.² Prior to that, their land was confiscated by the Israeli state and they had been displaced from their homes. They have Israeli citizenship, but those living in the “unrecognised” villages have no address registration, which can lead to problems with accessing services. Living conditions in the “unrecognised” villages are poor: there is no electricity, running water or transportation. Services in the “recognised” villages are also severely substandard, with only elementary schools and basic healthcare facilities.³ Most worryingly, homes in the “unrecognised” villages are under constant threat of demolition, with the Israeli state recently having adopted more restrictive regulations and undertaken a large-scale campaign of clearing entire villages, leaving their inhabitants homeless.⁴

The unemployment level among the Bedouin is higher than among any other community in Israel. Among women, this level is extremely high, with less than

10% of women participating in the labour force at all.⁵ This is combined with very low levels of literacy (approximately 90% of Bedouin women are illiterate), a high prevalence of traditional practices such as polygamy, and a high incidence of diseases, especially stress-related ones like hypertension.⁶ Most girls do not continue their education beyond elementary school.⁷ Bedouin women suffer multiple discrimination on the bases of both gender and ethnicity. The Israeli media portray them as primitive and backward. Levels of political participation are extremely low.



Photo credit: Sidreh-Lakiya

Sidreh is an organisation of Bedouin women from the Negev desert in Israel.⁸ Based in the village of Lakiya, it was founded twelve years ago with the aim of empowering Bedouin women through educational and rights-based initiatives. The organisation's activities centre around economic development, awareness-raising and advocacy, social empowerment, and education. Sidreh works with a number of other organisations both within Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories,



Photo credit: Sidreh-Lakiya



Photo credit: Sidreh-Lakiya

and abroad. Its educational programme, which is recognised by the Ministry of Education, has resulted in major improvements in literacy and educational attainment among participating women. Part of the organisation is a social enterprise, centred around the Lakiya Negev Weaving Project, which enables over 70 women to use their traditional weaving and em-

broidery skills to produce high-quality products for sale on the domestic and international markets. Importantly, it gives Bedouin women a social life and a source of income, and enables them to gain a range of skills, including IT, accounting, administration and driving.

On behalf of The Equal Rights Trust, Vania Kaneva met with two women who manage Sidreh - Khadra Elsana and Hala Abu Shareb - and obtained from them the following testimony, presented here in their own words.

My name is Khadra, I have four children and I live in Lakiya, a village in the north of the Negev desert in Israel. I work at Sidreh. Our organisation is named after a tree that grows up in the desert. We chose this name because it represents the women of our community, who are strong like the tree despite the situ-

ations we find ourselves dealing with. The organisation works on different levels: economic development, education, health, and housing. We established our organisation in 1997 with a small group of women from all around the Negev. We wanted to make a change in our community, to make women more involved, to encourage them to participate in community life, and to give women the skills to do this. The first things we did were all about empowering women and teaching them skills that would enable them to ask for their rights, both within the community and from the government.

We have different projects. The weaving project, which is on the economic development side, was the first project in all the Negev and all of Israel that was based on a social enterprise model and the idea that simple skills like weaving can be used to empower women. Participating in a project like



Photo credit: Sidreh-Lakiya

this gives the women independence and confidence, and empowers them on all levels – personally, economically and socially. Today the project supports 70 women all around the Negev.



Photo credit: Sidreh-Lakiya

Half of the Bedouin population in the Negev live in unrecognised villages and the situation in them is bad. They do not have even basic services such as electricity, running water, roads, transportation and high schools. Not even health clinics – only some unrecognised villages have one, but these are not open all the time. They have only one general doctor for the whole village and no specialist doctors for women and children. Since there is no electricity, they are powered by electrical generators for a couple of hours a day, so the clinics do not store most medicines and vaccinations.

More than 80% of Bedouin women aged 30 and above are illiterate, especially in the

unrecognised villages. The first high school that was built in the Negev was built in 1979, and not all women went – it was very new for them. 77% of Bedouin girls in the unrecognised villages drop out after elementary school and do not go on to complete their education beyond the sixth grade. The main reason is that in the unrecognised villages there are no high schools, so they have to go to the nearest of the seven recognised villages. The parents are afraid to take this risk and send their daughters to a different family, especially since the schools are often named after a local family or tribe, which can cause problems. The level of teaching in these high schools is in any case very low and the classes and schools are overcrowded. Less than 10% of Bedouin pupils who graduate from them – boys and girls – continue to higher education. They are not well prepared to take the entrance exams for university.

Our work on education started 10 years ago and so far we have reached 1400 women, who can now read and write in Arabic, and also 1600 women who completed their secondary school through our project in the unrecognised villages. What our organisation does is provide classes for illiterate women in the unrecognised villages, in both Hebrew and Arabic. All the services in Israel are in Hebrew – hospitals, banks, post offices – and the women want to learn it. We also have a group for those willing to complete their education. We teach especially young girls who have dropped out from school but want to complete their high school education and continue on to higher education. There is no curriculum for this kind of teaching. We are the first and only organisation that created this curriculum which fits exactly with the needs and worries of the Bedouin women, and which is relevant to them. According to a number of theories, the best way to teach

is to deal with the issues and problems relevant to the people you are teaching and the things they deal with on a daily basis. The organisation also provides training for the teachers, who are usually academic Bedouin girls who need continuous learning in order to develop their skills. When we enter a village, it is not just for teaching. We also organise lectures on various topics, including human rights. We have brought in lawyers, doctors and other professionals to give talks. Sometimes the women themselves ask for a particular topic.

We give women the tools to develop their own committees - women's committees in each village - through which they can claim their rights. In one case, after a lecture given by us, the women gathered together and decided to write a letter to the Ministry because there were no garbage bins in their village. They wrote it on their own initiative, but the main thing was that they knew how to ask, where to ask, and they knew their rights and entitlements. The government didn't provide garbage bins - they told them that they would have to buy them, and of course these women do not have money for this. But the fact that they did something, that they already know how to ask, is important.

Another big problem in the unrecognised villages is home demolitions. In 2005, the government issued a regulation which allowed them to demolish a house without asking or telling the people living in it. Since then, they have been constantly demolishing houses all around the unrecognised villages. They come in the morning when the husband is away so that only the women and the youngest children are in the house. Most of them cannot speak Hebrew, and even if they could, it would not help. The government officials come with a big crew of more than 30-40

units - army, police, everything. They bring down the house and then they send the bill for their "work" to the people to pay. There is no stated purpose of this. The only reason they give is that the villages are unrecognised, and that this land does not belong to the owners but to the State of Israel. They are trying to move the Bedouin to settlements that the government itself makes. The Bedouin right now sit on less than 2% of their original lands - and on this 2%, the government is carrying out demolitions. The experience is extremely traumatic for the people involved. They are not given any option, no other accommodation and they are left literally on the street. In the last Ramadan, they stepped it up and were carrying out demolitions almost every day. They destroyed one entire village. We arranged a protest after this. Our women went to Jerusalem one day to protest against the demolitions next to the Knesset.⁹ This was the first time Bedouin women have participated in this kind of civil protest. Politics is generally considered men's business, but when it comes to their houses, the women can stand up as well. There were a large number of women at the protest, and it was very amazing to see.

In our community in the Negev, speaking of politics is often taboo. It is considered a man's job. Last year we decided that enough was enough - we must involve women in politics. In the recognised villages, there are Councils and it is essential that women become more involved in these and use them to claim their rights. We organised the first conference, we brought the first Arab woman who was elected to the Knesset and the first Bedouin in the government, and we spoke about women's involvement and these women leaders' roles in increasing women's participation. It was the first time we spoke of this in public. It was agreed that we must encour-

age more women to participate in communal life. We established the first women's committee, which will be responsible for voicing women's demands. This is small politics, on the local level, but this is the way to start. Now they have the first community centre, which they built together with men, and it has been agreed that the women will have use of it in the morning, the children in the afternoon and the men in the evening. This is the first time women have been involved in the planning and physical development of their village – the first time women's needs have been considered in this regard. It is not much that they need – most people want a simple life, to be able to work their lands and their animals in peace. But there are younger people as well who want a more modern life and a modern village. So on one side there is a contradiction between the generations, young and old, which is normal and exists in most communities, while on another side there are contradictions between men and women. With our organisation, men have been supportive because we have a strategy about dealing with problems. The organisation's staff know how to address men – when we enter a village we go to the men first and we do a lot of work to convince them that men and women need to work together, and the benefits of what we do and women's participation. The Israeli government has said to us that the problem is with our men, that they do not want us to be more involved, but we said to them that they need to provide services and leave us to sort out our internal problems. You cannot punish an entire community. The government needs to do its job.

The situation in the Negev is such that no one feels safe and each family becomes more closed and isolated as a result. Forty years ago, all the families were united and it was easy to find men and women and people

from different families working together. This is no longer the case. People are becoming internally divided into clans and families, men and women. People are afraid of each other and have no sense of security. Many men do not want their women to work outside the home. Men still feel responsible for providing for their wives and children, but they are no longer able to do so due to high unemployment and lack of work opportunities. This makes them frustrated and they are more protective of women.

We carry out lobbying both inside and outside Israel. We have petitioned the Knesset about many things: employment, health, housing and rights. We are also using the domestic courts but this has not brought about any improvement. First and foremost we need recognition, and a solution to the land problem. If this gets solved, the rest of the problems will be much more easily solved. There is little that community organisations like ours can do about the wider peace process, but we are trying to create awareness of our culture and people among Jewish Israelis and foreigners who come to visit us. Israelis hear about the Bedouin from the media and they have created wrong stereotypes about us, which we are trying to break. We have many ideas about how to overcome this and bring people together. One of the ways we spread awareness is through our newspaper. It is only in Arabic at present, but we want to issue it in Hebrew as well, so that the Jewish people may know about who we are. Our newspaper reaches some of the non-Bedouin Arabs in Israel, and they have expressed surprise. They also have stereotypes about us and see us as simpler people. Our newspaper tries to inform them about us. The difference in development between us and other Palestinians, in the West Bank and within Israel, is up to 50 years.

The primary challenge for our organisation, and generally for civil society in the Negev, is funding. We have our road and our vision. We know where we want to go. We have a strategy about how to work within our com-

munities, with the government and with the international community, but we need support. We learn from everything we do, from our experiences, but we have to go to great lengths to secure funding.



¹ The seven government -planned villages are al-Shba, Rahat, Laqiya, Ar'ara al-Naqab, Qseifa, Houra, and Shqueb al-Salam (Segev-Shalom).

² The nine "recognised" villages are Um-Batin, Gassar al-Ser, Al-Grain, Um-Matnan (Abu Krinat), Bir Hadaj, Makhul, Wadi Gowein (Mulada), Tarabin and Drijat.

³ The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, *The Arab-Bedouin in the Negev-Naqab Desert in Israel: Response to the Report of the State of Israel on Implementing the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*, October 2010, available at: http://www.phr.org.il/uploaded/Final_Shadow_report_ESCR_1Nov_10.pdf.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Off the Map: Land and Housing Rights Violations in Israel's Unrecognized Bedouin Villages*, 30 March 2008, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/03/30/map>; "Israel police raze 'illegal' Bedouin village in Negev", *BBC News*, 27 July 2010, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-10777040>.

⁵ Sinai, R., "66% of Negev Bedouin Live below Poverty Line", *Haaretz*, 15 January 2007, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/66-of-negev-bedouin-live-below-poverty-line-1.210067>.

⁶ Sidreh, *Data on the Bedouin Women of the Negev*, available at: <http://www.lakiya.org/121194/Data-on-the-Bedouin-Women-of-the-Negev>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For further information, see the Sidreh website: <http://www.lakiya.org/>.

⁹ The Knesset is the Parliament of Israel.