

# Does Education Necessarily Mean Enlightenment? The Case of Higher Education among Palestinians—Bedouin Women in Israel

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*This study challenges and evaluates modern-liberal-humanistic discourse on education as enlightenment through analysis of the life stories of the first Bedouin women to acquire higher education (hereafter: First Women). The liberal discourse is examined in terms of its ethnic and genderial contexts and the special status these women gained as trailblazers. I explore the meaning of enlightenment among Bedouin women and the question of when and whether (higher) education facilitates or impedes their progress. [education, enlightenment, post-modernism, modernism, Bedouin women]*

Although many previous studies have examined the role of higher education in the lives of women from patriarchal societies and the conflicts it introduces in their lives—such as the dual-role conflict, the generation gap and complexity in finding a mate (Howell 1999; Mac 1996)—none have evaluated these conflicts vis-à-vis liberal-humanistic discourse, nor have they challenged the modern discourse conception of education as enlightenment. Other researchers, who concentrated specifically on the role of higher education among Negev Bedouin women, have described education as a tool for social mobility, progress, and personal and social change (e.g., Abu-Rabia-Queder 2006; Pessate-Schubert 2004). Studies of Palestinian women in Israel (Abu-Rabia-Queder 2007a; Erdreich 2006; Weiner Levy 2006) have delineated the conflictual aspects of exposure to higher education, particularly in the sphere of marriage, return to one's village after studies at Israeli institutions, and the conflicts that emerged in the conception of feminine identity. Such conceptions have never been assessed, however, against the modern conception of discourse on education as enlightenment and progressiveness.

This study contributes to contemporary research by elucidating the problematic inherent in the modern conception of education as enlightenment when applied in the Bedouin context. It does so by evaluating the significance of modern discourse on education in the given contexts of time and place, including components such as gender, ethnicity, and status in society, thereby assessing modern discourse on liberation against postmodern discourse on education.

## **Discourse on Education: Between Modernism and Postmodernism**

Humanistic-liberal modern discourse maintains that education will bring about harmonious, multifaceted development of the human personality, rendering it autonomous. In an effort to liberate themselves from the narrow-mindedness that typified the “dark” Middle Ages, Renaissance humanists turned to scientific activity.

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This spirit of modernity apparently constituted the driving force behind the Age of Enlightenment in 18th-century Europe (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969). Kant (1966) and his contemporaries emphasized the critical and autonomous thinking that develops when people apply their intelligence. According to this tradition, humanistic education seeks to intensify humaneness and freedom by imparting knowledge, enriching the imagination, developing sensitivity to others, and shaping interpersonal behavioral patterns that embody respect, honesty, fairness, generosity, and social responsibility.

Kierkegaard, one of the originators of existentialist philosophy, claimed that, above all, education is a troubling and challenging personal process that one carries out in choosing an image and shaping one's personality as a subject and as an autonomous, independent individual who does not submit to conformism (Aloni 1996). The purpose of the existential educator is to reinforce the "subject" within human beings, to rescue the tangible personal essence from the fiery jaws of the collective and to help young people assume full responsibility for their choices and become "human beings" (Buber 1984:367). The radical approach to education of the 1960s extended this humanistic schema (Freire 1972; Giroux 1983), viewing education as a liberating force whose purpose is to empower individuals, enabling them to perceive reality in a critical and autonomous manner, identify the forces therein that affect their lives, and develop inclinations and skills conducive to leading their lives for their own good and that of their community. In short, the humanistic discourse identified with the foundations of modernity is characterized by faith in the power of wisdom, sensitivity, morality, and creative imagination to advance humanity toward an enlightened and just ethos.

By contrast, the postmodern position rejects the purported objectivity and universalism of wisdom as mere pretension. Three aspirations characterize this position: (1) exposure of personal foundations and cultural, historical, and class contexts; (2) placing the various positions in the historical-cultural space of power struggles, including covert ones, for cultural dominance; and (3) rejecting the alleged superiority of any scientific, philosophical or ethical outlook. Postmodernism upholds multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, and cultural relativism, and it disputes liberal-humanistic conceptions of a unified and rational subject.

The postmodern view challenges liberal humanism regarding education in theory and practice, but the problematics posed are questionable, as discourse on education takes shape within discourse on enlightenment, progress, and modernity. Education is the grounded narrative of a modern enlightenment that believes in rationality, wisdom, and a liberated and critical subject, rendering it difficult for postmodernists to determine its place (Usher and Edwards 1994). Nevertheless, postmodernism offers an essential contribution to our understanding of discourse on education as progress, as demonstrated in the Bedouin context addressed in this study.

The chief postmodern claim against the modern perception of education focuses on subject-power relations. Although the humanistic conception of education views individual subjectivity as an absolute entity, the postmodern position considers subjectivity to be constitutive—constructed and reconstructed through various discourses concerning language, society, culture, and the subconscious. Hence, the educational system is part of the system that creates discourse in society, although education constitutes a process of internalizing hegemonic discourse. Postmodernism also challenges the liberalist claim that wisdom will bring about critical thinking that

in turn leads to liberation, so that social change is the product of self-fulfillment. This claim ignores social, cultural, and political components, thus raising the question of who it is that is liberated. At times, destruction and ruin are perpetrated in the name of liberation and progress.

A different postmodern view is reflected in the writings of Foucault (1986) regarding the connection between knowledge and power. According to the modern conception of human-liberal discourse, power is the exclusive province of government or state political structures and is perceived solely as repression and destruction. In contrast, Foucault maintains that knowledge is a powerful liberating force that frees the individual from repression. Power is thus an integral part of knowledge. Although the power generated through knowledge (education) indeed becomes the object of hegemonic power, at the same time, wherever there is power, there is also resistance (Foucault 1986:6).

The present study does not privilege one discourse over another in evaluating Bedouin First Women. Rather, it seeks to use both of these contemporary liberal discourses on education as an interpretive lens to explore the educational and gender experiences of university-educated Bedouin women in the Israeli political and educational context.

### **The Politicized History of Bedouin Education**

Education of women is not a new phenomenon among the Negev Bedouins. It goes back to the British Mandatory authorities, who created two dual educational systems (one for Arabs and one for Jews) in 1917. At the time, about 65,000 nomadic Bedouins lived in the semiarid regions of the Negev and engaged in simple agriculture. Although they were a very small minority, their unique position received special attention in educational matters from both Ottoman and British administrations. During the 1920s, the Mandatory administration maintained schools for Bedouin boys in five tribal areas. At first, teachers moved along with the tribes as the seasons changed, but in time, tribal schools were established and housed in permanent stone structures located within each tribe's territory (Abu-Khusa 1994:172).

In the 1930s, the authorities established a boarding school in Beersheba at which Bedouin children, mostly sons of sheikhs and notables, could continue their high school studies. By 1934, there were two schools, one for boys and one for girls (Al-A'raf 1934).

In May 1948, as a result of the UN resolution to divide Palestine between Jews and Arabs, the school building was taken over by the Israeli Southern Command and turned into a rest and recreation facility for soldiers. When the region became part of the State of Israel in 1948, most of the 75,000 Bedouin became refugees in the Arab countries and only 11,000 of those who remained were relocated to a reservation under military rule, thereby controlling and restricting their mobility. This measure affected their economy, education, and gender practices (Abu-Rabia 2001).

Most of the region's schools were closed during this period; Arab education was only available in the north of Israel. Bedouins had to ask for special permission to avail themselves of educational and employment opportunities. As a result, an entire generation of Bedouin tribes, especially women, had virtually no access to formal education.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Israeli government built seven villages for Bedouins in the Negev Desert, seeking to gain control of their lands (Human Rights Watch 2001). These villages, called "permanent settlements," were populated by about 50 percent of the Bedouins, but only in the early 1990s. The rest stayed on their land, a measure considered illegal by the Israeli state. Those who remained did not benefit from any basic services, such as running water, electricity, sewage, or schools. The approximately 40 "unrecognized villages" are not identified on any map (Human Rights Watch 2001). As a result, schools in those villages have been set up on a makeshift basis; they do not represent official recognition of the respective localities, but, rather, have responded to immediate, temporary needs for temporary education. Classes take place in shacks with no electricity or water. No other educational facilities or equipment are available, such as libraries, laboratories, and learning aids. Roads to these schools are unpaved and weather conditions preclude regular attendance. As such, most students do not benefit from normative learning conditions (Meir 1997). Furthermore, educational conditions in the permanent settlements are far from optimal. Although part of the recognized educational system, the schools continue to suffer from unequal budgets and impoverished facilities, not unlike the rest of the Arab educational system throughout Israel.

It was not until the late 1970s that two high schools were built in two recognized villages. Very few of the participants in this study attended those schools, the remainder seeking education at Arab or Jewish boarding schools in northern Israel.

Thus, although struggling for education and living conditions in Bedouin settlements, Arab women in northern Israel had a better developed and more advanced school system. Data (Españoli 1994) show that between 1969 and 1972, the number of female Arab students enrolled at Israeli universities increased from 141 to 305.

During the 1970s, Kaye Teachers' College opened a special track for the Bedouin population, attracting some Bedouin women who later participated in this study. An interview I conducted with the first director of this program, Dr. Miza'l Ghanem, reveals that the first generation of educated Bedouin men began studying only in 1976, at which time there were 22 male students and one female—the first Bedouin woman to acquire higher education. According to Dr. Ghanem, Bedouin women were afraid of being seen in the public sphere and it took four years until another two women enrolled. It was only after the turn of the century that female students outnumbered the males (39 and 23, respectively).

Most Bedouin families preferred to send their daughters to this program, rather than to university, as it was taught in their own Arabic language, had less stringent entrance requirements, and suited their culture because studies ended before dark.

It was not until 1988 that the first Bedouin woman was admitted to university in the Negev Region. By 1998, only 12 Bedouin women had attained their bachelor's degrees, including the author (Negev Center for Regional Development 2004).

### **The Politics of Higher Education among Arabs in Israel**

Higher education in Israel reflects power relations in society as a whole, thereby also reproducing the cultural hegemony of the majority. Majed Al-Haj demonstrates that the "dominance of the majority extends from the wider society into academia" (2003:352). In this respect: "a gap exists between the social structure, which is divergent and multicultural, and the formal culture and higher education, which is basi-

cally Jewish, Western-oriented and devoid of any multicultural concept" (Al-Haj 2003:352). University studies entail exposure to a new culture, society, and knowledge. Academic institutions support the dominant ideology and the instruction offered therein follows the assumptions and values of the prevailing discourse. University space and the cultural and social discourse it creates for students were discussed by Bourdieu (1988), who maintains that their significance extends beyond imparting knowledge or education. He does not perceive university knowledge as "pure science" alone, but, rather, as cultural knowledge that is influenced by a specific sociocultural context that it shapes accordingly.

Arab students gain unique experience during their university studies. The universities are almost the only venue in Israeli society at which Arabs and Jews meet on an equal footing (and even there, the starting points are not equally aligned). Separate educational systems keep Arabs and Jews apart during their studies in primary and secondary school, so that they meet only at university. This encounter is an important factor in the consolidation of the Arab students' civic identity and their relations with the Jewish majority. These gaps create two worlds and thus engender a dichotomy between the Arab culture and the Israeli Western culture. At university, Arabs may sense various types of deprivation: financial difficulties (most Arab families live below the poverty line), problems renting off-campus accommodations, adjusting to new demands, and gaining fluency in academic languages (English and Hebrew; see Al-Haj 2003).

For these women, starting university studies in Jewish Israeli space (in central cities in Israel) constitutes entry into a new and different cultural world that exposes them to values and norms different from those of their culture of origin. The identity formed as a result of their encounter with and exposure to a world that is unfamiliar to them and the return thereafter to their villages entail changes in gender identity and feminine self. Studying at university and presence on a coeducational campus constitute their first experiences in an alien society with its own dominant culture and individualistic inclinations.

### **The Changing Status of Bedouin Women**

Bedouin women's status is constantly undergoing change, primarily the result of political and historical changes that affect Bedouin society and reshape Bedouin women's status and roles. Before their forced move to the villages, the Bedouins' livelihood was rooted in agriculture and livestock raising. The division of labor between men and women was clear cut: The man was primarily responsible for guarding the land and receiving visitors, although the woman was in charge of farming itself (Abu-Rabia 1994; Marx 2000). Thus, men were largely dependent on the decisions and knowledge of their wives in all that concerned the family's domestic livelihood.

Women derived power from this system and from their productive roles, using the feminine model to acquire power and increase their status. For example the quality and the number of gifts that a visitor brings a woman and the way she is treated provide women with their own social hierarchy. A woman's age (higher status and respect for older women), the number of her male children, and her skills in producing handicrafts all determined her status (Dinero 1997). The contributing status of women stemmed from their traditional feminine roles as mothers, wives, and sisters.

They thus enjoyed a considerable degree of power and autonomy that involved participation in decision making on such issues as relations with neighbors and marriage of daughters (Abu-Lughod 1999; Meir 1997).

The difference between the male and female worlds reflected the agency and power of Bedouin women. In her study of women in a Bedouin tribe in Egypt, Abu-Lughod (1999) shows how sex segregation allows the women to act freely in the absence of men. Bedouin women find cultural ways to express their resistance to male power: They smoke cigarettes in secret and gossip and dance when they are alone, far away from men.

Their changing roles are also related to the changing role of urbanizing males. As more and more men seek employment in Israeli markets outside the village, develop skills in the language used by Jews, and acquire new norms, the gap between men and women widens. Men begin following Jewish habits (eating in restaurants, buying clothes and even sexual behavior) and become less dependent on their wives. As desert feminine roles are no longer needed in urban settlements, women become restricted to domestic child care responsibilities, with little movement outside the home. Although urban villages supply welfare services, schools, and clinics, most women declined to use these facilities, fearing their husbands may suspect them of forbidden affairs with other men (Fenster 1998). At the same time, they lacked the skills required for work outside the house and the state did not provide them with an appropriate workplace that suits Bedouin customs (Abu-Rabia-Queder 2007a; Jakubowska 1988).

## **Methodology**

Having provided a basic understanding of the gender and political context, the next section will convey how fieldwork was conducted among this first generation of Bedouin women. This study adopts a postpositivist approach, focusing on narrative research that addresses meaning as part of the participant's life story. The narrative stream characterizes each person as someone who creates stories concerning his or her identity, focusing on the participant's interpretation of his or her life (Bertux and Kohli 1984).

The research rests on two methodological approaches. First, it is a feminist study, stemming from both the author's gender positioning as a woman in Bedouin society and from the positioning of participants. Second, it is an indigenous study, stemming from the author's cultural positioning as an Arab Bedouin who examines her own culture.

### *Research Population and Sampling Method*

In seeking to interview First Women, the study employed a purposive rather than a random sampling method. This method samples individuals who have a special interest in the matter at hand—what Miles and Huberman refer to as “politically important cases” (1994:28). Every woman interviewed was the first from her village (recognized) or tribe (unrecognized) to attain education in an institute of higher learning in Israel (total number 17).

Because the researcher is part of the Bedouin community she studies, she located the Bedouin women through her local knowledge about those women, and because

they were few, it was not difficult to reach them. Some she knew personally, and those with whom she was not acquainted she found through other Bedouin men who studied with them. Participants' ages during the study ranged from the late twenties to early fifties.

### *Interview Procedure*

All interviews were conducted in Arabic, the mother tongue of participants and researcher alike, at a local university. This site was chosen as a quiet place where there would be few distractions from family members. In-depth narrative interviews were held in two sessions, although some continued for four or five sessions, seeking to obtain a rich and authentic narrative concerning different aspects of the participants' lives (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The interviews employed two methods found to be mutually complementary in this study: Rosenthal's (1994) open-ended question producing a narrative life story, followed by semistructured questions conforming with Corradi's (1991) approach. This was supplemented with questions relating to specific themes not addressed in the life story, such as marital life and secret relations with men, as well as necessary clarifications. These interviews are identified as ethnographic because they also involve "discovering" and "describing" and are aimed at uncovering and constructing women's realities (Spradley 1979).

### *Analysis of the Interviews*

The stories of the interviewees were analyzed by a holistic approach that relates to the whole life story, where some parts of the context are interpreted by other parts of the narrative (Lieblich et al. 1998). I focused on content at two levels: exposed (what happened?) and hidden (what are the underlying motives?; see Rosenthal 1994).

## **To Be a Trailblazer: Conflicts and Coping**

I examine the theme of "enlightenment" via the questions: Did the products of higher education among First Women change their gender roles and their tribal status? If so, how so? This question is examined through their educational, occupational, and personal stories that represent different meanings of being First Women. Stories are presented so as to reflect conflicts and coping mechanisms.

### **Conflicts**

This section reveals some of the conflicts that First Women faced as a result of their educational achievements. They experienced conflict inside and outside the Bedouin community, on and off campus, in their inner selves, identity, and their existence as women, Arabs, and Bedouins.

#### *"To Be Poor"*

On the daily encounter at university, Bedouin women are exposed to the stark contrast between Arab poorness and Jewish richness. This encounter with a new reality engenders Bedouin women's critical thinking about their civic identity.

Rayan,<sup>1</sup> who had excelled at school, discovered the inferiority of the Bedouin educational system: "I felt the gap between university demands and my own high school studies. I was the best student in my school and I used to receive the highest grades, but those grades were nothing compared to Jewish schools." The high grades she received in her Bedouin school system were not equivalent to the rich knowledge Jewish students came with to university, which created a better starting point for them. This experience made Rayan feel like she had not learned a thing in high school.

The discriminated state policy toward Bedouin education is also evident in Huda's experience. Coming from an unrecognized village, she described how often she could not attend classes because of flooding of the nearby river. Her family's poor living conditions did not help: they lived in a shed, and she had no corner in which to keep her books or study. Her encounter with Jewish students at university caused Huda to ask: "Why is it they have things and I don't?"

Huda's and Rayan's narratives express the unique experience that Arabs gain during their university studies. This is virtually the only place where Arab and Jews meet on a daily basis. As other studies of Palestinian students in Israeli universities have shown, such exposure creates a feeling of exclusion and disadvantage in comparison to their Jewish peers. As a result, Arabs feel like "others" and consider university as "other" for them (Al-Haj 2003; Erdreich et al. 2005).

### *"To Be a Stranger"*

On returning to their families and community from university, the First Women found that the various aspects of identity that emerged during their studies were not always compatible with the expectations of Bedouin society. They felt that acceptance of the Bedouin collectivist social code and gender norms distanced them, at times, from their inner selves and suppressed their personal characteristics and desires. The need to return to one's home society varies in intensity among different cultures. Bedouin women return to their tribes or villages as working women who hold a different identity from the one they had before going on to higher education. Thus, as educated women in their society, they have to struggle against the conflict that stems from their new status as educated women.

Entering university with its Western Israeli norms, attitudes, and way of life was recalled as a "shock," but at times, coming back to the Bedouin social environment was considered an even greater upheaval because of the changes in identity that the women underwent during their studies, for they had acquired values and norms of freedom and individual choice that were not acceptable in Bedouin culture. As Siwar describes: "We had classes where we could reveal ourselves, say what is on our mind, things that I could not experience at home." Incapable of fulfilling these norms in their own community, they felt like strangers in their own society.

Alienation became stronger in Mervat's story after she returned home from the northern Arab boarding school, as she says:

It was a disaster, a real disaster, I found myself living in—imagine. I always thought I could continue [to follow non-Bedouin norms]. I thought that the Bedouin rules would not be imposed on me. I never thought that I had to obey any Bedouin law. Because I did not know the truth about Bedouin society. I imagined in my head a different culture with different norms.



As a consequence, Mervat created a conditional belonging in her mind, that is, she belonged to Bedouin society on her own terms. She built in her mind her own society and positioned herself within it, in internal borders distanced from Bedouin society. Because her terms for belonging were not approved in Bedouin society, she felt a sense of “disbelonging” and this had a price:

At my parents' house I am not a guest, [but] I am a guest in my surroundings. I am one of you, but I am not similar to you. This means that everyone should stay in his own borders. My uncles never determined our lives. Never. Our home was our own society. I always felt that my home is my society. What happens outside my home does not belong to me, I am not part of it.

When I asked Mervat, “where do you feel you belong?” she said: “I see myself in my world.” “What is your world?” I asked. “The world I live in. It's my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters and that's it. This is my society.” When I asked: “Do you feel part of your society?” she said: “Bedouin society? No. I don't define myself as Bedouin, I am Mervat and this is how I define myself. No more and no less.”

The changing identities and the women's positioning in the merging of their cultures affected their interpretations of cultural-gender norms. The unequal treatment of women typical of their own culture made these women critically reinterpret these norms according to the liberal values of individualism they acquired during their university studies.<sup>2</sup> These educated women described their distress through their consciousness of inferiority and inequality, unwilling to accept such inegalitarian gender practices.

University as an academic place has meaning beyond the role of providing knowledge or education. In this sense, higher education can be conceived as an encounter between knowledge, society, and culture through practices that influence an individual's identity (see Barnett 1993; Bourdieu 1988). These practices construct, conceptualize, and use academic knowledge to shape that identity. University studies thus create an encounter with different values and cultures that make the individual reexamine his or her own values and perspectives and consider new ones.

#### *“To Be Educated”: The Paradox of Femininity and Education*

Returning to their communities after completing their studies, the greatest conflict the First Women had to face was between the social meaning of women's education and the varied social meanings of Bedouin femininity. The first such contradiction occurs in the private sphere: according to Bedouin social perceptions among men and women alike, a woman who acquires education may experience more difficulty in married life, in choosing a spouse and in being accepted by her husband.

One painful issue the First Women faced was the choice of a spouse outside tribal bounds, representing the greatest paradox inherent in their new status as educated women. By entering the university, these women not only encountered Israeli life but also met males with other tribal affiliations and fell in love with men outside the tribal limits.<sup>3</sup> As this sort of marriage is forbidden by Bedouin tribal codes, these women experienced conflict between their individual choices and tribal expectations. They were forced to let go of their emotions and cope alone with this painful situation. It was largely their trailblazing status in society that motivated them to make this compromise.

Samah, for example, fell in love with a man outside her tribe. At one point, she was ready to run away with him, but she changed her mind at the last minute when she realized the consequences of such action. She knew that as the first woman from her village to study at university, she was a role model for other women. If she were to run away with him, people would think that higher education for women leads to "inappropriate" behavior, thus shaming her entire family. Moreover, it could hurt her sisters' chances of acquiring education:

I could do anything, anything, but inside me was a deterrent, between me and myself, because I didn't want to hurt anyone from my family. I didn't want people to gossip about me, because then my parents could be hurt, my sisters could be affected.

Instead, she decided to marry another man not out of love, but as a compromise. She gave up her love for the sake of not soiling her father's name and honor.

Rana, who finished her studies and returned to her tribe, reached the age of 23, at which time her family and society expected her to be married. Her father stepped in and forced her to marry an uneducated man. It did not take long for the distance between the two to become palpable. Rana's husband grew jealous of her:

Our marriage did not last a year. I already had my first son. For three years, with the two of us in different places [they were separated], people got involved and tried to work it out between us, but I said it would not work. This man cannot find himself when he is with me. This is a man who always says to me: "Why do people love you and hate me? Why do they listen to you and not to me?" It's as though I am a bigger person and he wants to minimize me.

Her husband's attempts to restrict her eventually led to divorce that, from Rana's point of view, was the path to her independence. She did not hesitate to accept the divorce and keep her children with her, take care of them and support them.

Their status as educated trailblazers made it hard for the First Women to find a suitable spouse who would meet their intellectual needs and understand their desires.

Feelings of love and of the idea of liberal romantic love and marriage, as well as their choice of men from outside the permitted tribal limits, is an expression of the modern individual self (Illuoz and Wilf 2004), which is brought into a society whose tribal values do not allow for free choice of a partner, particularly not outside the tribal limits, which eventually clashes with the tribal cultural ethos. The result is that Bedouin women find themselves torn between their will to fulfill their choice in a man out of love, or fulfilling their individual desire as educated women on the one hand, and considerations of the cultural fabric they belong to, on the other hand.

This dichotomy imposed on them (see Abu-Rabia-Queder 2007b) and reflects the inner conflict between the individual self of the women and their collective cultural-social self.

Choosing their love from forbidden tribes stems from their individual selves, but giving up their forbidden love for the sake of sparing their fathers another tribal battle stems from their social-relational selves.

### **Coping Strategies**

The aforementioned conflicts raise a need for coping mechanisms. By attending institutions of higher education, the First Women violated traditional Bedouin femi-

nine role models and broke the ban on women's appearance in public.<sup>4</sup> As Bedouin society looked on anxiously, fearing that at any moment their names and those of their families would be slandered, these women were compelled to "prove" their morality and adherence to codes of modesty. I divide the coping strategies these First Women employed into three types: (1) primary strategies depending on the individual woman's behavior; (2) secondary strategies depending on the rational use of patriarchy (male legitimacy); and (3) the use of professional knowledge to challenge taboos.

Conformity, as it appears in these women's stories, expresses their use of education as a source for promoting individual choice and agency, but negotiates their new status within cultural content of their culture.

### *Conformity of Personal Behavior*

One way these women could prove their morality was to present a passive act, demonstrating to society that their feminine honor was preserved. Safa, a woman in her forties, related how she had to appear passive to succeed and gain acceptance of her role as an educated woman. This was true when she attended high school and teachers' college and when she began her career as a teacher. She used several terms to describe her passivity: walking in the mud, putting on an act, remaining silent, being honored, and exercising restraint to ensure success. The following account aptly describes such behavior: "[I would be] quiet, listen to the lecture, take notes, take my exams, succeed and return home." Her behavior is reminiscent of simply following directions: "When I went to study, I was required to be a quiet girl, an honorable girl. According to them, a girl who does not ask anything, who just sits there . . . I was acting as though I were honored through silence." Proving her honor as a woman meant being conservative and acting according to expected feminine norms. It meant acting as passive, hidden, and unseen to avoid patriarchal control mechanisms.

This honorable behavior proved to society that what the First Women did was worth the effort, paving the way for other young women in their community. Raya continued: "Maybe it was most difficult for me because I was the very first woman from our village. I opened the door for more girls. After me, they all went to study."

The result of this passivity was a feeling of responsibility toward other women, as Samia explains:

I felt that the future of all Bedouin women rests on my shoulders. I was the first woman from my tribe; I had to be a role model. I used to cause myself a lot of pain, giving up many things just to be a role model so other parents would not prevent their daughters from attending school. I felt a great responsibility to my society, Bedouin women and my parents.

Through their moral behavior, the First Women demonstrated to a resistant society that women entering the public sphere need not violate the social codes of the accepted feminine model, thus helping Bedouin society to become supportive and lift the ban. Interestingly enough, it was only after "proving" their moral behavior and intentions to society, and only after finishing their studies, that these women started to do more for themselves than for the sake of others. In their posteducational lives, they allowed themselves to experience their autonomous "self," to break the silence, passivity, and restraint. As Safa tells it:

Today I am more my own agent. I am doing things for my own sake, I am more aware of my own wishes. Today I don't have to prove anything to society—I've already done that and I can be an agent on my own terms and with my own capabilities. The focus today is on me!

When examining strategies that Arab women use to change their status, it is imperative to consider their cultural context. Most strategies employed by Arab women in their feminist struggles depend on their awareness of gender limitations and their willingness to negotiate those limitations to achieve their interests (Muge and Balaghi 1994).

In studies (Abu-Lughod 1985; Kandiyoti 1996; Nelson 1974) of women in Arab nomadic society, their conformity can be seen in how they play their roles as honorable wives, especially through gossip and women networking, to influence their husband's image in the community, which depends also on his wife's behavior. In this sense, the women use their most important cultural elements—shame and honor—to gain power and status.

But unlike the women addressed in the current study, they do not have to surrender any part of their lives to do so. In contrast, in the Palestinian Bedouin context, the first educated Bedouin women use conformity at the expense of their emotions and intimate lives to keep what they have gained: access to public higher education and employment. Through this process they emphasize their connective selves (Joseph 1993), sacrificing their personal happiness and emotional well-being, giving in to one norm (which requires marriage within tribal limits, regardless of who they love and wish to wed) to fight for social change and promote another norm—one allowing for their continued participation in the public arena and the creation of a second generation of educated Bedouin women among their families and tribes.

#### *Male Legitimacy: Conformity through Patriarchy*

Whereas the first category entailed coping strategies related to the behavior of the women themselves, resulting from the limits imposed on them, the second category of strategies encompasses the adoption of "external" features that depend on the patriarch (male figure). One strategy that helped these women prove their morality to society and facilitated their struggle to gain and maintain access to education and employment was the support of a male figure from the social patriarchal structure. This man served as a legitimate shield in the face of social limitations, not unlike the case of other Arab women in the Middle East in general, and in Arab society in Israel, in particular (see Abu-Baker 1998; Badran 1995).

Although earlier research has pointed to the Arab woman's father as a passive supporter of his daughter's education, in the current study, each father of the First Women had to join in his daughter's struggle, even when he himself was not in favor of her attending school. For when a daughter does so without approval from society and without there being other girls who also go out to study, it is her father who takes the blame. In some cases, a father was willing to pay the price of excommunication from the family, as Ruaida, a teacher in her fifties, married with four children, attested: "My father stopped being loved. When he passed people by or said hello, they did not answer him."

Rabab, a married teacher in her forties, with three children, received rare support from her oldest brother, and for that she is deeply appreciative:

Today there are no men like my brother. Where are all the Bedouin men who support their daughters? Today, there are many female students, but in my time, my brother used to take me to the university in the morning, bring me back and also give me an allowance when I got married.

The place of the father testifies to the connective nature of Bedouin patriarchy, as in other Middle Eastern societies, and especially to the female connective self in Arab culture. This is a "relational self," where people experience themselves as "part of significant others" (Joseph 1993:453) and where women's selves are constructed as interdependent within the group (Erdreich 2006:137). The women in this study feel obligated to their fathers for opening the door and allowing them access to education at a time when this was rarely permitted in the Bedouin community. Their fathers are not merely "significant others" to these women, but, rather, the very people who allowed them to challenge a forbidden norm. The responsibility these women feel to others is part of their relational self, as they perceive their access to learning and employment not only as an individual achievement but also as a collective responsibility to other women.

### *The Power of Professional Knowledge*

Professional knowledge is among the most important contributions of education to the First Women's lives. In particular, their professions enabled them to institute change in certain social norms and prohibitions that they could not have accomplished otherwise. Najla perceived her high-status profession as an opportunity to shatter taboos and tackle norms. She was one of the first educated women to become an attorney and did not hesitate to challenge the limits:

At first, I had a Bedouin partner. The Bedouins perceived me not only as a woman in this profession, but also one with a non-authentic Bedouin [i.e., from the forbidden tribe] as a partner. It was challenging. I did it on purpose. Even if it was for a short time, I had to do it. He was my partner for five months. I did it just to show them that I don't believe in differentiating between authentic and non-authentic Bedouins.

By adopting this feminist agenda in her profession, Najla indicated that she perceives her work as a mission: defending victims of discrimination while simultaneously challenging the previously uncontested oppressing powers in the social sphere.

Samira also felt that professional knowledge gave her power, especially with respect to her brother, who would beat her violently. Unhesitant, Samira went to the police, and as a result, her brother now has a criminal record. She recalled the traumatic experience in terms of the power she was given by the knowledge acquired during her studies:

They [the community] accepted this very slowly. I feel they accepted this fact whether they liked it or not, but they couldn't do a thing about it! They said: "She is a social worker and she knows the law." That's why my brother who beat me kept some distance from me. He could make me live this trauma all my life, but he knows that if he crosses the line, he will suffer. He kept his distance from me and was afraid even to speak to me. I can always hear what they are saying: "She knows the law. She can take you to hell before you even realize it."

Professional knowledge, as described in the First Women's narratives, apparently serves these women as an additional maneuverability strategy. I maintain that such knowledge differentiates between the status of these women as educated and as professionals. Professional knowledge was identified by French and Raven (1960) as a type of power that is on the special knowledge an individual possesses in a given

field. As professional women, the Bedouin First Women also have status as experts and are thus highly familiar with professional regulations, applying them for their personal benefit. Furthermore, they are more socially sophisticated than others, retaining the option to select their clientele and the nature of their work, as demonstrated by Najla, who chose a [professional] partner outside the permitted tribal boundaries. These developments are all because of the women's professional knowledge, that is neither possessed by nor known to anyone else in their community. In Najla's case, one paradox remains: One may work with an outsider but not marry him.

The power of Samira's professional knowledge was expressed in violation of hierarchical gender relations in her family by deciding to protect herself instead of relying on the traditional collective's protection, as is practiced conventionally (see Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999). She also broke with tradition by taking a position of feminine individualism when facing the male collective, thereby creating an individual status for herself that differs from the standard model for women in her community.

From the outset, these women drew their strength from the professional status they created for themselves. Proceeding from this point of departure, I maintain that the professional sphere is the only area in which women could express their individual self and not be punished for failing to conform with prevailing norms.

## **Discussion**

This study seeks to establish and evaluate the problematics of modern discourse on education in the context of Bedouin First Women. Further, it explores the significance of their initial departure for higher education, inquiring whether education alone indeed promotes and institutes change.

The findings of this study contribute to the anthropological and sociological research corpus on gender and education by emphasizing the complicated multidimensional facets of the contribution of higher education to changing gender roles in Arab societies. As other studies in Arab societies have shown (Ahmad 2001; Golnar 1999; Kirdar 2006), although many countries have expanded women's access to education, this is a quantitative change (increased numbers of female students) and not a qualitative one (a change in gender perceptions). Many Arab countries still hold traditional views about women's roles and express limitations through government policies, such as sex-segregated universities in Saudi Arabia and gender-biased school curriculum. Furthermore, although many women attend institutions of higher learning, they do not necessarily join the work force. Whether or not they pursue an occupation depends on their families' financial needs and the state's need for labor (Hijab 1989).

This brings me to the question of whether education alone makes a difference. Does education necessarily entail both objective and subjective progress in all aspects of life? In keeping with humanistic-liberal discourse, one need not entirely rule out the conception of education as a tool for liberation and development of an autonomous and independent personality. As demonstrated by the Bedouin First Women, higher education and professional knowledge imparted much power to women in all that concerns development of an independent personality from both personal and economic perspectives. Education transformed them into enlightened women. They

gained power, which is reflected in application of acquired knowledge—knowledge that constitutes a weapon in times of trouble, as Samira experienced. Education accorded her power, primarily against her abusive brother. Moreover, women with professional knowledge, especially those in high-status occupations (office managers and attorneys), are able to challenge boundaries, using their expertise to determine their destiny. Despite the challenge of their refusal to conform with community norms, they are not ostracized or criticized but actually respected.

Most interviewees attested that education and their subsequent professional life gave them power, especially financial independence. Among the First Women, such independence did not allow them the freedom to behave as they would have liked, but it was useful in addressing issues in the marital–domestic sphere; independence enabled women to survive unsupportive relationships. The added value of education as professional knowledge, as manifested in these women’s financial independence, is experienced chiefly in the absence of apprehension about being divorced or separated and living without husbands to support them.

Bedouin women who returned to their villages as educated women and later obtained employment did not achieve total autonomy, as it was difficult for their society to accept them after they shattered the prevailing feminine role model. The result was a crisis in their identity as educated women. Such experiences, that embody the cultural element of coping with a disparaging society, have no place in humanistic discourse, which lacks attention to sociocultural components of the autonomous subject, failing to take cultural communities with unique characteristics into account or to perceive any opposing discourse. Despite their autonomous choices, these women function within their own cultural frameworks, adhering to the limitations that society imposes and adopting strategies that suit their situation.

In contrast to this position, postmodern feminism emphasizes understanding local contexts and variance, as well as refusal to accept the existence of any inherent characteristics of liberated subjects (Spelman 1988; Talpade-Mohanty 1994). In the present context, I claim that behavior that appears conformist in nature actually represents change in the guise of tradition. When educated women, primarily as students, employ strategies to present themselves as respectable, passive, and silent, their behavior is context-dependent and should be interpreted according to the characteristics of the local culture.

Humanistic–liberal discourse also accords considerable attention to the social responsibility and sensitivity to others that develops in subjects who use their wisdom. The First Women assumed social responsibility for their actions, as reflected in constant sensitivity to the community and its needs. However, the humanistic–liberal conception is not entirely useful in determining the role of education as the underlying cause of these developments, as the responsibility these women assumed and displayed toward their community is not an inherent product of their education. The social responsibility they manifest is not the direct and exclusive result of applying wisdom, but, rather, embodies more complex parameters—a feminine gender dimension and a trailblazing dimension. Their behavior is aimed at proving to society that they maintain their honorable feminine self, as expected. This claim negates a basic principle of humanistic–liberal discourse regarding absolute subjectivity, as the present context displays objective conditions as well: cultural expectations of educated women as women and consequent activation of supervisory mechanisms to keep them from violating the traditional feminine role model as they pave a path into

the public sphere. Analysis of these women's social responsibility for other women in their community shows that it originates not only in their status as educated women but also in their function as trailblazers who seek to preserve the position they attained and the opportunities they were granted.

Another weakness of humanistic-liberal discourse is that its claim of absolute subjectivity leaves no place for the collective. In the Bedouin context, there is constant association between the individual and the community; the dynamics between the First Women and their Bedouin society cannot be ignored. The limitations imposed by the community motivates these women's conformist behavior, paradoxically resulting in continued reinforcement of their status as educated women. The knowledge-power connection should be taken into account as well. Specifically, power also has another, disempowering side, namely the women's awareness of their own limitations. This knowledge is not the product of formal education, but, rather, of the conditions under which these women acquired and applied such education, that is, gender and ethnic characters of their status. Their trailblazing status in a culture that had no female students before them makes knowledge as disempowerment, reflected in the awareness of Bedouin gender limitations that these women developed through their exposure to values of independence and free choice during their studies, together with the knowledge that they would have to cope with these limitations if they wished to return home. Furthermore, women's consciousness raising of their discriminated ethnic status during the encounter with the Israeli "other" reveals the oppressive conditions of the Bedouin population. It thus emerges that the modern liberal approach is flawed in its attention to the context in which knowledge was acquired.

The First Women's narratives demonstrate that the connection between wisdom-education and self-fulfillment is neither direct nor univalued. Self-fulfillment does not occur immediately on acquisition of education. On the contrary, education initially renders these women strangers, alienated from their community, actually making it more difficult for them to do anything on their own behalf, to behave as they would like. As such, they do more to gratify their community than themselves. Self-fulfillment as educated women is achieved at a much later stage, once they have "proved" their morality to society. The present context, with its complexities and unique expectations of women, thus demonstrates that self-fulfillment is not a direct consequence of acquiring education. This is particularly evident in the First Women's stories about the emotional-marital sphere. In a society that finds it difficult to accept the connection between women and education and views higher learning as a threat to spousal relations and the family unit, acquisition of education made it difficult for these women to find husbands who would accept them as personally and financially independent, educated women.

Finally, I would like to address the limits of knowledge. The First Women acquired their education outside their cultural boundaries as a result of political and historical conditions affecting the Bedouin educational system, intensifying the gap between them and their culture and between the Israeli culture. Their subsequent return to their culture of origin caused them frustration and a constant sense of cultural alienation. For these reasons, I return to the question of whether education in the complex context before us necessarily entails progress and liberation. If so, who are the beneficiaries?

Paulo Freire (1972), one of the originators of liberation theology, claimed that one of the loftiest objectives of education is human liberation. Liberation cannot take place



without awareness, without a conception of reality that incorporates a critical view toward itself. But even education toward liberation requires certain conditions, such as support of the political establishment—an empowering element that the repressed lack. Furthermore, claims Freire, the liberating activity of education can occur only if it is directed against the ruling culture and authority of the repressors. Liberating education operates exclusively through creating dialogue with those it seeks to educate.

In the context of Bedouin First Women, the liberating activity is not as simple as Freire maintains. Acquisition of education—particularly professional knowledge—indeed “liberated” these women by encouraging critical thinking about the realities of their lives, changing their conceptions and positions regarding their status as women in their own patriarchal society and the surrounding Jewish society during their studies, and directing their attention to prevailing inegalitarian conceptions in the realities of their lives. Their ability to leave nonsupportive spousal relationships and make their own personal and independent choices also attests to independent critical thinking about society and knowledge of what such women do and do not believe to be fitting and proper for themselves.

Nevertheless, the significance of liberation in the Bedouin context differs from the Western manifestation or the one to which Freire referred. Freire claimed that the act of liberation can be fulfilled only if directed against the dominating culture. If we consider Bedouin women as dominated and Bedouin society as dominating, the behavior of these women cannot be perceived as directed against Bedouin culture. They do not rebel or declare any struggle against it, nor do they perceive it as a dominant culture. Rather, they maintain a kind of dialogue with it to realize their desires, employing the prevailing repressive conventions subversively to achieve their desired liberation. It is precisely this absence of revolt or declared struggle against society that led to a degree of “liberation” for this first generation of educated Bedouin women.

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## Notes

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1. Biographical details (such as occupation and age) are not mentioned in order to protect the women’s identity.

2. This is not to suggest that Israeli society has only liberal values. In fact, it holds nonliberal values toward women and ethnic minorities (see Herzog 1996; Rabinowitz 2001).

3. The Negev Bedouins are divided into two groups of origin that are considered culturally different: the “pure” Bedouins, that is, the first to come to the Negev from the Arabian Peninsula—who are considered the original, authentic group—and the Falaheen-Bedouins, who joined them 200 years later and are originally from Egypt, Transjordan and the Maghreb. The former, having arrived first, became landowners and are thus considered of higher status

than those of the latter group, who lack property. Bedouins refuse to allow their daughters to marry Falaheen men because they are not confident of the purity of their Arab origin (Ben-David and Gonen 2001).

4. By "public appearance" I refer to the first time these women had to leave their tribes and go to an Israeli institution, studying and living there by themselves, something that was forbidden to women during those times (mid-1970s and late 1980s).

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