

# **The activism of Bedouin women: Social and political resistance**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines several models of the feminist struggle of Bedouin women in the Negev region in southern Israel. These women are doubly marginalized: as women living under a patriarchal, male-dominated society, and as part of a discriminated ethnic (Arab) minority group in Israel. The presented findings are based on my own triple status as a researcher of Bedouin women's issues in Israel; a feminist activist in Bedouin women's organizations (NGOs); and a Bedouin woman who herself suffers from and fights against discrimination. My findings on the feminist activity of Bedouin women's organizations are based on my active participation in some of them. The paper analyzes the feminist activity of these NGOs in terms of three models: "reviving tradition," "re-Islamizing patriarchy" and "rebellion." My claim is that these models are modes of political action and social resistance.*

## **Introduction**

Feminist democracy suggests a different order of relationships among people. It suggests understanding socioeconomic, ideological, cultural hierarchies of rule (like those of class, gender, race, sexuality and nation), their interconnectedness, and their effects on disenfranchised people within the context of transformative collective or organizational practice.

In formulation of feminist democracy, agency is theorized differently. Women do not imagine themselves as victims or dependents of governing structures, but as agents of their own lives (Alexander and Talpade-Mohanty, 1997:xxviii).

The main contribution of postcolonial feminist dialogue with regard to assessing the actions of women in postcolonialist and patriarchal societies is rupturing the previously uniform category of "all women and any women." The feminist postcolonial dialogue recommends that gender concepts also be examined in relation to additional categories, such as ethnicity, status and culture.

Feminist activities in non-Western societies are usually adapted to the contextual reality of the specific culture. Occasionally they defer to Western feminism and occasionally they adapt it to their own context, or derive from it certain perspectives, thus creating their own type of feminism. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) suggests the concept of “local dialect,” which enables understanding of the unique characteristics of various types of feminisms, including aspects of silencing, elimination and active or passive resistance. In addition, Abu-Lughod (1990) recommends the investigation of Middle Eastern feminist movements through nation-building, ties with Western nations, political status, the ideological use of Islam and the struggle over the use of Islamic law in the State mechanism.

Much of the research conducted in patriarchal societies has adopted this approach, especially that focusing on Bedouin women in the Negev. From the 1990s, and particularly reflected in the research of educated women, the Bedouin woman of the Negev has been described as an activist who copes and struggles (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2006; Pessate-Schubert, 2004). However, there are no studies that examine the agency of Bedouin women through community activism as part of the activities of women’s communal organizations.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine the types of struggles developed by feminist women in the Bedouin society of the Negev. The focus will be on the main issues that concern these women, whether addressed through organizational or individual activism modes, as well as the strategies they choose in order to bring about personal and societal change. Based on my feminist activities within women’s organizations over the past four years and my presence as part of the Bedouin society that implemented some of these strategies, I examine such questions as: What is the “local dialect” of Bedouin women’s activism? What is the agency of such activism? The paper presents two main models of feminist activism within the Bedouin community: “reviving tradition” and “re-Islamizing patriarchy.” In addition, the study examines the characteristics of an additional form of activism, namely, “individual activism.”

## **Feminist activism in the Middle East**

Activism in the Middle East is not new. Its roots lie in the philanthropic activities of the early nineteenth century. Both Muslim and Christian religious associations of the time valued philanthropy and provided for society’s less fortunate in various ways. This trend continued into the early twentieth century, when most of the welfare associations were secular and managed mainly by women of aristocratic families. Although the legacies of such associations are still alive today, present-day non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are different and follow a distinct logic.

Bayat (2002) divides NGOs in the region into four categories. First, there are religious associations organized by mosques and Islamic figures, or by churches and Christian institutions. In this category, most (Muslim) associations are Islamic social movements (“social Islam”), which provide significant means to help disadvantaged groups cope with hardship; they offer welfare services, such as health, education and financial assistance, and they conduct social community activities in mosques. The second category of NGOs are classical welfare associations, often managed by well-to-do families, and they incorporate certain developmental functions, such as income generation, training and community upgrading. The third category is comprised of professional associations managed by professionals driven by human interests or material self-interest. Finally, the fourth category includes State-sponsored NGOs. All these categories of associations are active in diverse fields, such as human rights, women’s issues, welfare, culture, business and development.

One of the major factors contributing to the multiplication of NGOs in the Middle East is the need of poor countries (such as Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia) to fill the gap left by the State’s inability or unwillingness to face the challenges of social development subsequent to the implementation of neo-liberal policies. Population growth and urban migration place a heavy burden on urban social services; and when the State is functionally nonexistent, as in Lebanon or Palestine, organized self-help may fill the vacuum (Moghadam, 1997).

Social Islam, the establishment of NGOs and other types of activism appear to have become the dominant forms of activism that today contribute to improving many aspects of women’s lives (Bayat, 2002). The feminist side of Middle Eastern activism focuses on two bases of legitimacy: the Muslim people, whose legitimacy derives from religious law and historical continuity, and the national state, whose legitimacy derives from nation-building, development and modernization. Within the national discourse, the place of the woman is dependent on her biological role within the family; her national responsibility is defined by her ability to bear children as a contribution to nation-building, which also increases her participation in the public sphere. Such is the case in Palestine.

Activism in Palestine began as a result of the national struggle. Women’s participation in this struggle, particularly after the founding of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, ushered in a new era of women’s activism. Operating under the auspices of charitable organizations, women organized literacy, sewing, first aid and nursing courses and founded orphanages, hospitals and schools. Some women in the West Bank also took part in nationalist demonstrations and the distribution of leaflets. However, despite these activities, until the 1970s there were no dramatic shifts in consciousness about gender issues among the women living in occupied Palestine. Only in the late 1970s and early 1980s was this “nationalist” activism transformed into “feminist-nationalism” (Berger-Gluck, 1995). Four women’s committees were organized to recruit women into nationalist movements,

and through this activity the women created their own venue for program design that meets gender needs. Thus, these pioneer activists laid the foundation for the development of grass-roots activism and heightened gender consciousness. A similar phenomenon was occurring in Lebanon (see Berger-Gluck, 1995), where national resistance movements (1972–1982) created opportunities for women to participate as official members and workers in resistance movements. Nonetheless, “the women’s question” remained tied with the nationalist struggle.

Within Islamic discourse, women’s inferior status is justified by legal sources (Kuzma, 2003). Thus, for example, researchers of Iranian feminism have demonstrated that, in a State whose legitimacy derives from Islamic law, the discussion about the status of women relates to their loyalty to the regulations of Islam. When the State is presented in the Iranian political debate as the protector of faith, Iranian women who strive to promote feminist demands answer the State’s accusations by emphasizing that it does not meet its religious responsibilities (Kuzma, 2003).

Investigating social change in Morocco, Kuzma (2003) demonstrated how Moroccan women experience the gap between their educated status and successes in the work force, on the one hand, and what they describe as daily humiliation resulting from implementation of Islamic law, on the other. In the 1980s, women in Morocco created forums of expression, as well as intellectual and feminist activities through the media, academia and political discourse. They left the general newspapers where they worked and established an independent newspaper that offered a feminist platform. They abandoned the women’s sections of general political parties and established independent or semi-independent women’s movements.

One of the more interesting aspects of their struggle involves women’s participation in the male-dominated debate about Islam. These women have attempted to utilize religious texts to gain cultural legitimacy for feminist social change. They describe the gap between Islamic writings and practices, claiming that Muslim society is subject to a patriarchal mentality and cannot escape from para-Islamic, tribal customs. They aim to change the personal status laws that relate to women’s rights to choose a spouse, to gain an inheritance and with regard to guardianship. Indeed, the struggle to change these personal laws is at the heart of feminist movements throughout the Middle East (Hatem, 1993).

Men’s participation in Islamic feminism is characteristic of Middle Eastern feminism. Feminists, particularly those who focus on modification of personal laws, demand training in Muslim law, which women are usually banned from and which is necessary in order to afford legitimacy to expression regarding this charged issue. Likewise, feminists utilize the writings and research of experts on Muslim law.

In Palestinian society in Israel, activism emerged in the early 1990s predominantly due to the failure of various political parties to advance equality of the Palestinian society in Israel with the State’s Jewish citizens. Although political parties such as Labor, *Hadash* (Communist party) and the Arab Democratic Party (ADP) have

elected Palestinian members to the Knesset (MKs), the efficacy of these MKs in promoting Palestinian concerns has been negligible, partly because Palestinian politicians are often marginalized within the Israeli political arena. Thus, Palestinian activists have created alternative, non-political routes in order to achieve development in the Palestinian sector. Most Palestinian organizations work on social and economic issues, such as education, land rights and domestic violence (Faier, 2005).

The case of Bedouin women in Israel differs entirely from those of women in other countries of the Middle East, primarily because they are an ethnic minority residing in a State where the majority of citizens are Jews. The relationship between this minority and the majority involves hostilities and exclusion; therefore, the struggle of Bedouin women is dependent on their place, which gravitates between the ethnic realm (as part of the Arab minority) and the gender realm (as part of a patriarchal tribal society). In order to examine the feminist activities and strategies employed by Bedouin women (within organizations or as individuals), it is necessary to investigate the political-cultural context that brings these women to strive for social change.

### **Bedouin women in Israel: Political and social exclusion**

Traditionally, the Bedouins have lived in nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes, surviving through mostly agrarian means. This lifestyle has meant that they are literally caught in the middle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Over the last 50 years, this conflict has restricted the movement of everyone in the vicinity. Thus, for most Bedouins, the traditional lifestyle and economic pursuits are no longer viable options. As a result, Bedouin women are twice marginalized: once, as part of a Bedouin minority separate from the Jewish majority and Arab minority, and, again, as women in a male-dominated society. This dual discrimination affects women's status in all aspects of their lives. This paper examines how socially excluded Bedouin women in Israel are using strategies of power and resistance—models of activism—stemming from Bedouin tradition and Islam to improve their position in society.

#### *Ethnic exclusion in a Jewish-majority State*

The Bedouins of the Negev are among the Palestinian Arabs who remained in Israel after the establishment of the Israeli State in 1948. Today, they comprise a minority group among Israeli citizens. From 1948 until the late 1960s, the Negev Bedouins lived under the Israeli military administration, as did all Arabs in Israel. This meant that they were isolated from Arab populations in other parts of Israel and needed special permits to leave their designated areas in search of jobs or education.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Israeli government developed plans to resettle the entire Negev Bedouin population into seven urban-style towns. In reality, only 50 percent of the Bedouin population of 120,000 was actually transferred to the

planned towns (known as “recognized villages”), while the other half remained, and continue to live, in “unrecognized villages” in the former restricted territory on their own lands. These “unrecognized villages” lack basic services, including plumbing, electricity, roads, health clinics and high schools. Today, Bedouins have access to very few economic, cultural and social resources. Arab communities tend to be the poorest in Israel; they lack an industrial tax base, depending more heavily on residential property taxes. Arab schools lack sufficient classrooms and existing ones (especially among the Bedouins) are in poor condition, with fewer libraries, sports facilities and laboratories than Jewish schools.

*Gender exclusion in tribal Bedouin society*

Bedouin women also experience gender discrimination perpetuated by two cultural codes that govern Bedouin life: the sexual code and the collective code. The Bedouin sexual code affects every aspect of a girl’s upbringing, from childhood to marriage. Under the sexual code, perceptions of honor and shame dictate behavior.

The status of the Bedouin family is determined by its size, which depends on women’s reproductive abilities. As a vehicle of procreation, the Bedouin woman is both marginalized and venerated. Her primary role of reproduction emphasizes her connection to uncontrolled nature, which restricts her ability to be perceived as morally equal to men. But this sexuality also makes the woman important; she is highly protected by Bedouin traditional law and any offense against a woman may lead to revenge by her male kin.

At the same time, the collective code in Bedouin society plays an important role in female marginalization. The Bedouin woman is meant to marry for the sake of the collective rather than for her own personal interests in order to increase the size and power of the group (her extended family). The collective code also infiltrates the individual’s life; any person who wants to be honored in his/her group has to obey the group’s codes by displaying unconditional loyalty to the tribe, and any shameful behavior weakens the power of the group. To prevent this, women are watched constantly and are married only to their relatives.

In the name of these two codes, many Bedouin women have only restricted access to the public sphere, especially to education and employment. To this day, many girls do not attend school because their families are afraid they will bring shame to the tribe by meeting boys from other tribes. Thus, these codes place the Bedouin woman in a paradoxical position: while she has an important role as preserver of the honor of the family and the tribe, she is also extremely marginalized by lack of appropriate conditions, such as separate classes for boys and girls, that respect Bedouin cultural norms.

## Models for Activism

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the increased presence of NGOs in many marginalized Bedouin communities in Israel has introduced the possibility of change to many underserved groups. As discussed below, these models for activism empower women within their sex-segregated societies through the formation of women's collectives, networking and the revival of traditional feminine skills.

As activism in Palestinian society in Israel in general, and in the Bedouin community in particular, appears as foreign and thus threatening, and as the concept of the NGO is not inherent to Arab culture, but rather a Western import, activism is considered a sensitive topic in relation to women, especially in terms of the conflict between ideals of modernity (such as free choice, equality) and family tradition. Elizabeth Faier (2005), who studied Palestinian NGOs in Haifa, demonstrates that this conflict is both important and dangerous: women who break the dictates of tradition run the risk of ostracism and even death. As in other Middle Eastern countries, Palestinian society in general, and Bedouin society in particular, view feminism and especially female organizing as a threat. Since family, the kin group and the tribe are the organizing units considered as the legitimate institutions for decision making (and controlling women), women who assemble in groups are perceived as threatening existing institutions (Chatty and Rabo, 1997). It is therefore important to explore the strategies that Bedouin activists working within their community use to forge a compromise between the modern ideals of equality and individualism, on the one hand, and traditional-collective tribal values, on the other, in a way that can create change without risking women's status. This challenge is expressed in two strategic models: reviving tradition and re-Islamizing patriarchy. These strategies fall within the spectrum of organizational activism (NGOs) and social activism carried out by individuals, who may function through organizations and/or on an individual level.

### *Reviving tradition*

One form of activism involves the revival of feminine traditions that are ostensibly superfluous nowadays in the recognized villages, where services, such as electricity, water and shopping, are supplied. Bedouin women traditionally lived in the desert and their productivity derived from performing the elementary tasks of daily life, such as agricultural harvesting, collecting wood for fire, drawing water from wells, milking goats, preparing food and collectively being responsible for domestic duties and for the upbringing of children. These roles positioned them in the heart of decision-making. With the imposed settlement in recognized villages, these women lost many of their productive roles and could find no alternatives due to lack of employment services for men and women alike. Thus, they became unemployed in their own domestic sphere.

Currently, daughters and granddaughters are reviving these traditional roles through local NGOs. Two leading organizations that promote these issues are SIDREH and the Association for Promoting Women's Status, both of which are located in and function out of the Bedouin village of Laqia. The younger generation women teach the older generation to read and write, and revive traditional Bedouin cottage industries, such as rug weaving. In doing so, they challenge (in both overt and implicit ways) the historical, political and social structures of oppression. These projects often include hundreds of women from a single village, who assume the roles of coordinators, comptrollers, production managers and marketing managers. These women create rugs, handbags and traditional jewelry, marketing them through Internet sites and direct sales at various events. In return, they receive some monetary compensation. Through such means, these pioneering women both revive tradition and once again assume productive roles through the additional income they bring to their families. Thus, the women's individual empowerment serves to empower their families and, as more and more families are empowered, the entire Bedouin community is empowered as well.

The example delineated above is merely one of numerous feminist activities ongoing in the Middle East, North Africa and other developing countries. The participating women do not deny their tradition, but rather embrace it to promote their status, to pave their way and to move forward. Given that the Israeli government has not provided employment opportunities for women in the villages, they create their own alternative by reinventing their traditions. Thereby, they create a new and innovative form of feminism; although they work in the domestic sphere, the results of their labors—their products—reach the public sphere and are credited with international marketing. This model of feminism avoids the overt public sphere, thus evading a blatant clash with the traditional expectations of Bedouin women. The activities do not violate the traditional prohibition against public appearance or impinge on the traditional values of *aib* (shame) and honor. Instead, their actions encourage a continuity of feminine tradition and simultaneously challenge the status of Bedouin men, the traditional societal breadwinners, by allowing women to be breadwinners in their own right.

This strategy has also been adopted during times of economic crisis among Latin American women activists. In her study, Nash (1983) illustrates that, while some Latin American women are employed in the service sector, the vast majority organize collective meals, health cooperatives, mother's clubs, neighborhood water-rights groups, or their own textile and craft collectives, which produce goods both for street vending and for international marketing. Thus, rather than privatizing their survival issues, Latin American women collectivize them and form social change groups based on social reproduction concerns. According to Nash, Latin American activists contend that their traditional roles as wives and mothers are the basis for such collective action on behalf of their families. Although these groups are composed of poor women,



they are organized not on a class basis or at a particular workplace, but rather on a neighborhood level around a broad list of issues that the participants redefine as women's concerns.

The commonality between Bedouin and Latin American activists is their organizing around traditional domestic issues that are not perceived as a threat by their societies. Nonetheless, as their gender interests expand into traditional power arenas, they will undoubtedly represent a force that, increasingly, must be contended with.

Another promising project, initiated by the Arab-Jewish Center for Equality, Empowerment and Cooperation (AJEEC), trains Bedouin women to be photographers and disc jockeys in the women's sections of weddings. The training is held in the nearby city of Beersheva. Since Bedouin society is sex-segregated and forbids any public contact between men and women, both public and private spaces are created for women at weddings. Women DJs and photographers, who can appear only in women's sections, transform this segregation into a powerful space where women have the authority to do as they wish. This decreases the competition for jobs between men and women by creating special employment opportunities just for women. These women do not pose a threat to their male counterparts, since this is a modern activity (music and photography) that does not impinge on Bedouin wedding customs.

The benefits of single-sex projects that can be practiced only in sex-segregated societies are similar to those found in other tribal societies where sex segregation is a source of power and not oppression, as is assumed in Western thought. Kirk and Winthrop's (2005) study on rural Afghan women after the fall of the Taliban describes how women were excluded from the educational system because the government could not provide access to school for many children, especially in rural areas. Such lack of access is particularly true for girls, whose parents are often reluctant to allow them to walk far from home, while boys are granted more freedom of movement. The efforts made by activists to challenge women's social exclusion from education involve the establishment of home-based schools that give priority to classes for girls and for recruiting women teachers. Such a strategy takes into account the gender needs of women and girls. Much attention is given to the specific needs and perspectives of women teachers and to the possibilities of including gender-focused and women-specific content in teacher training. Creating a women-dominated space (women teachers) proves to be an effective tool in this situation, since it fits the sex-segregated perspectives of the community. Women's participation as teachers may motivate other girls to complete their education, as parents only send their daughters to classes taught by female teachers who are known and trusted in the community. Thus, teaching within the security of their own homes allows women to play active roles in their communities while challenging the norms that exclude women from male-dominated community and development activities. Some teachers have indicated that the training—especially seminars on the psychological needs of children—helped improve their own maternal skills. This is a small but important example of how pedagogical

training can empower a woman within her own family, thus, improving her status within her domestic sphere.

The common theme of feminist activism in patriarchal societies, as shown in the cases of Bedouin, Latin American and Afghan women activists, revolves around their use of traditional domestic models and the feminine traditional role. Although activism and feminism are modern Western concepts, and thus perceived as threatening to traditional communities, women activists adjust these concepts to their cultural identities. They emphasize the roles that will guarantee the most respected status: their mother-feminine-family role. Maintaining their cultural feminine identity is a crucial part of these women's activism.

Ngan-Ling (1993) explains this dilemma in the context of Asian American women activists. She claims that Asian American women, for the most part, do not participate in white American feminist movements because that could endanger their gender and ethnic identity, as a result of their double marginal status. Subordinated to an Asian patriarchal culture, they fear that accepting American values of freedom in conflict with cultural Asian family values would injure their status as women. Participating in mainstream American feminist movements would be perceived by Asian men, as well as other Asian American women, as drifting away from the Asian culture—a perception that might offend the male ego and harm male-female relations. Thus, Asian American women try to create a balance between their gender and ethnic identities.

### *Re-Islamizing patriarchy*

In addition to the forms of activism described above, Bedouin women also use Islamic religious texts to challenge patriarchy at both the organizational and individual social activist levels. Although the Bedouins are a Muslim community, some of their social practices are in opposition to the dictates of Islam, especially in regard to issues involving women's rights, such as marriage. Bedouin women use Islamic texts and the Quran to challenge taboos that are not discussed publicly or academically in Bedouin circles—most notably, the tribal structure of the Bedouin society, which largely prohibits marriages between individuals from different tribes.

The tribal code of Bedouin society originated in their historic nomadic lifestyle. For the purpose of self-defense, nomadic Bedouins created alliances with other tribes that resided in the same space and married only within these allied tribes. These tribal alliances protected the individual and the collective. Although times have changed and many Bedouins have moved to villages, the tribal structure has not disappeared, and marriages must still remain within the old tribal alliances affiliated with desert life. This behavioral code adversely affects mainly women (especially educated women), who are forbidden to marry men outside the tribal limits. The Bedouin tribes have a hierarchy: the older, "authentic" tribes that originated in Saudi Arabia are held to be superior, while the later tribes that originated in Egypt are considered to be inferior.

Thus, while men from the superior tribes can marry women from other tribes and from non-Bedouin communities, men from the inferior tribes cannot marry women from the superior tribes.

This taboo was challenged only recently by the women themselves, through women's organizations and the work of individual activists. Because the women could not overtly challenge the taboo, they broke the silence around it through acceptable ways of resistance, such as citing legitimate Islamic texts that give (Muslim) women their right to marry outside tribal limits (Saleh, 1972). The Bedouin community is not a religious community and largely behaves according to tribal codes that may contradict Islamic codes. Thus, the Bedouin women resist in a collective way to avoid the harm that would befall an individual woman who resists by herself. The following examples demonstrate both the organizational struggle and the efforts of individual activists.

In November 2001, the women's organization Ma'an<sup>1</sup>the Forum for Bedouin Women's Organizations<sup>2</sup>together with Ben Gurion University of the Negev, organized a conference entitled, "Arab-Bedouin Society in the Negev: Between Tribalism and Modernity," to bring the tribal issue into the public light. Though all the organizers were women, they invited men from other organizations for two reasons: first, because change has to occur not only among the women, but also in collaboration with the men; and second, to involve men and challenge their worldview in the discourse of tribalism. For these purposes, they carefully selected eminent representatives of Bedouin society to assume the roles of keynote speakers: a religious judge (of religious Islamic courts), a religious sheik of the Islamic Movement (political party) and a female social worker who spoke about the psychological effects of tribalism. In other words, instead of speaking against tribalism themselves, and thus challenging the structure of Bedouin society, these women invited two men of religion to speak and provide the religious justification for prohibiting tribalism. In this way, the Bedouin women avoided being branded as rebels and safeguarded their organizations. This is also an illustration of how the modern element of free choice regarding the right to select a spouse is activated in Bedouin tribal society. Integration between modern elements of science (the social worker) and Islamic traditional elements (the two sheiks) legitimates discussing this taboo openly.

The above is an example of negotiating between the local and the global, between modernity and tradition, not one at the expense of the other, but as two complementary elements in changing taboo norms (Giddens, 1994). Combining modern and traditional elements creates a space for agency, legitimizing activism that challenges the status quo.

Another example of the use of religious legitimacy is the case of a young woman from a "superior" Bedouin tribe who wanted to marry a young man from an "inferior" tribe. When the bride's tribe heard about her father's approval of this marriage, they threatened the groom's tribe not to allow the match to take place. During the couple's long struggle, one way the bride applied social pressure to convince her own tribe

was through religious texts. The couple published a manifesto in a local newspaper that used Islamic sources to prove they had the right to marry, and this weakened the resistance of the bride's tribe and the power of patriarchy. The manifesto read as follows:

The Arab of the Naqab [Negev] lives under difficult life conditions partly due to being a discriminated Arab minority. It is very sad that sometimes Arabs complicate our lives, a thing that goes against common sense, instead of uniting to promote Arab society at all levels, especially the social level.

Several weeks ago one man tried to break the tribal barrier by marrying his daughter to one of the Muslim educated sons of the Naqab; this was resisted by several people claiming the tribal excuse. Those resisting have forgotten what was written in the Quran: "Oh people, we created you as male and female and made you tribes and nations so you know each other, so the moral one amongst you will be protected by God," and the prophet's adage: "If a man came to you [for marriage] and you approve of his religious beliefs and morals, so marry him." Thus, continuing to cite tribal norms as superior to the holy adage is not acceptable.

Our brothers, the Bedouins in Jordan, who originated from the Naqab, have been liberated from these forgotten norms and have abandoned the tribal *taasub* [fanaticism]. That's why we call on all of you to do the same and follow our friend, whom we bless for taking the first step to break these norms. It is time that our community follows in his steps and avoids these harmful norms that bring only ignorance and destruction to our society, which needs, especially at these times, unity and respect for different points of view.

This manifesto was signed by men and women from the "superior" tribes, professionals on the same social level as the woman's tribe.

This manifesto caused a great upheaval among the Bedouins after unsuccessful attempts were made to ban its publication. It is the first public, written declaration regarding this taboo, and it confronts tribalism by citing Islamic text and transforming the bride's father into a local hero or role model who follows the Holy Book and should be emulated. The list of signed supporters is another method of exerting social pressure legitimized by religion in order to convince others. Comparing the norms of the Negev Bedouins to those of the Jordanian Bedouins demonstrates that tribalism is not sacred, and that it will eventually disappear, to the benefit of all. Raising this taboo in the public-social discourse is beneficial to the men from "inferior" tribes, who are also limited in their marital choices. These men cannot raise this issue themselves, as they are threatened by the men in the "superior" tribes.

These cases point to two main strategies used by Bedouin women striving to make changes: the use of male figures to gain legitimacy, and the use of religious texts in the feminist struggle or what I refer to as “re-Islamizing patriarchy.” Using male support is a common theme of women’s activism in Middle Eastern countries. This phenomenon can be seen among Palestinian women who run for political office with the support of male figures, thereby reducing resistance (Abu-Baker, 1998). Another example involves Arab-Druze pioneer women in Israel who, with their fathers’ support, have managed to break down traditional walls and study in institutions of higher education (Weiner, 2002). For a girl to challenge traditional customs, she must recruit the support of a male, as the dominant figure in a patriarchal society.

This sort of “re-Islamizing patriarchy” is also demonstrated on the behavioral level through traditional-religious dress. Many feminist, activist and educated women prefer to wear traditional dress in public (such as covering their heads with a scarf) in order to provide legitimacy to their public appearance in the male domain. Thus, they prove that they can be activists and feminists without disrupting the traditional feminine model of the Bedouin woman. In this manner, they are more accepted as social leaders and as agents of change without breaking the most important code from the Bedouin perspective: that of feminine honor. This strategy is also common among Muslim feminists in the Arab world, who consider the veil as a powerful, liberating symbol rather than an oppressive one. They see it as a safety net that allows them to move freely in the public sphere and protects them from sexual harassment (Abu-Odeh, 1993).

Muslim feminists in Iran, for instance, choose the religious framework for their activities and spurn the secular feminist model as one that does not take into account their cultural milieu. Working from the Muslim religious framework enables them to remain in the religious community, where they have the opportunity for activism without being considered a threat to society. These women claim their rights to be strong powerful women in their religion, to be feminists without fear of being blamed as tainted with Westernization. In the Bedouin context, women use Islam in order to “remind” their (male) community of their forgotten rights in Islam, the rights that were taken from them by tribal patriarchy.

However, in contrast to other Arab feminists in Muslim countries, who struggle to change the law (personal law status), Bedouin women in Israel cannot change their laws, since they do not live in a Muslim country, nor does their society practice Islamic rules concerning women. Rather, they are ruled by Muslim *shari’a* (courts), where laws cannot be changed by any authority—neither Parliament nor the religious courts themselves. Furthermore, there are no Muslim women judges who can struggle against these laws and, thus, this route presents a dead end for Muslim women in Israel.

*The rebels: Social individual activists*

A final category of activists refers to a minority of women who are outside the mainstream of the feminine Bedouin model. These women, usually educated, do not wear traditional dress. While they maintain traditional behavioral norms, they choose to wear pants and do not cover their hair with a scarf, claiming that external looks do not necessarily reflect a person's morals. This group of women is unique, as they enjoy their family's legitimacy and usually are daughters of a non-Bedouin mother who married a Bedouin man. These women choose a more difficult route, because their appearance runs counter to the accepted traditional feminine model. Thus, it is harder for them to be accepted in traditional male society and they are often referred to as "rebels."

Despite the differences between these "rebels" and other Bedouin women, even the "rebels" need social approval for their activism, as they work within the community. Women who try to break the barriers that define their gender limitations will often find themselves outside the very social circle that they are trying to change. The case of the "rebels" raises the issue of the Arab women's place in Arab-Bedouin society. As Badran (1995) noted, even the most powerful Arab women face the possibility of ostracism if they cross certain cultural barriers.

This category of "rebels" is an example of how activism affects the individual lives of female activists. Like Palestinian women activists in Israel who see themselves as unusual, the rebels' organizational activity and their approaches to sexuality in their personal lives set them apart from other women. In Faier's study, Palestinian women activists claimed that, in order to work in society, they have to be accepted by it. As one stated: "Even if women seem modern from the outside, they may not be this way on the inside or they might hide their conflicted feelings" (2005:198). Thus, we see that women activists personally identify (or ostensibly identify) with the agenda they espouse. Many activists in Palestinian organizations, for instance, are in the early stages of marriage and thus face the often difficult question of how to implement at home what they advocate in their social activism.

This is one of many reasons that Bedouin women's organizations do not call themselves "feminist organizations" within their communities, but rather "women's organizations." They are feminist, their agenda is feminist, but they do not declare their "feminism," due to the threatening connotation of the word that is rooted in the West. In Palestinian society in Israel, women activists usually explain that being a feminist—or even using the label—is difficult because of the threatening negative connotation of the word in Palestinian society, especially when working with women.

## Conclusion

Several issues arise from the strategic models I have described in Bedouin society. First, what is the nature of such activism, or as Faier (2005) puts it, what is the culture of such activism? In other words, how does women's activism combine the local and the global? What is its balance between change and preservation? How do women combine their inner search for change with the use of activism as a modern concept in their society and culture?

The struggle of Bedouin women shares the same traditional characteristics as the struggles of women in other Arab countries in the Middle East, where women also utilize strategies described as "Interism," which reflects the belief that Arab women should cooperate with tradition and the community as a tactic to manipulate the social order while changing it (Hélie-Lucas and Hegelan, 1993). Kandiyoti (1988) and Nelson (1974) referred to this as a sort of bargaining with patriarchy; women increase their safety and survival in the face of oppression, a variation on the game's rules. They negotiate their social order with men, resisting traditional limits in a non-aggressive way and following cultural norms in exchange for honor protection and the opportunity for public participation.

However, in contrast to other Middle Eastern cultures, there are a number of differences in the struggle of Palestinian women in Israel in general, and Bedouin women in particular. First, they live under Israeli rule and are defined as an ethnic minority in a country that is not defined as theirs. Thus, one of their foci is acting against ethnic exclusion and demanding equality with the other citizens in Israel. Although this remains one of the goals of Palestinian community organizations in Israel, it is not the direct struggle of Bedouin women's organizations. Because Bedouin women are subject to a number of oppressive agents, both patriarchal and political, they first function on the local level, with regard to the acute problems that they experience. In addition, the struggles regarding lands are by and large managed by male-dominated organizations that tend to exclude women.

An additional characteristic of Bedouin society in Israel that is not present in other Middle Eastern countries lies in the struggle to alter Muslim law. In other Middle Eastern countries, Muslim law reflects national law. In Israel, these laws are part of the *shari'a* court system and women have no access to them or authority to fight for change. This presents an additional challenge, because it is difficult to enforce either Israeli national law or Muslim law on a society that does not function according to such laws, particularly when women's and marriage-related issues are involved.

Furthermore, in the Bedouin context, change is more complicated, as the societal structure is based on tribalism. As shown, tribal codes in regard to some issues, such as marital restrictions and opposition to personal choice—which might seem alien to a Western reader—are more forceful than Islamic texts when it comes to daily practice. As Bedouin women cannot receive any help from external formal (institutional)

authorities to change these taboos, they cope by “reminding” their community of its religious roots.

Another insight that arises from this paper is in regard to the nature of these women’s actions. It has been demonstrated that these women work to preserve their gender identity as part of their cultural identity, in an effort to succeed in their struggles. They strive to change their society while simultaneously preserving the place of the Bedouin women within the culture without damaging their status. In doing so, they integrate global modern elements with local ones.

While, at times, culture provides an identity framework through which activists define themselves as Bedouin, at other times, culture signifies a masculinity and a hegemonic system against which Bedouin women attempt to fashion alternative notions of femaleness. Thus, Bedouin women, like other Palestinian activists in Israel, negotiate the institution of culture by intertwining modern and cultural tools. In other words, Bedouin women negotiate not only through their tradition (as in other Middle Eastern countries), but also by using modern elements to penetrate their traditional societies without threatening tradition overtly. As the term “feminism” is perceived as Western and dangerous, the women embrace feminism without identifying it as such. They use it in a reflexive manner (Giddens, 1994), with the democratic tools of modernity or, in other words, “civil activism,” but they adapt it to their own voices.

The women do not use modern concepts, such as human rights, liberalism and gender equality, to refer to their activism, but rather transfer these concepts into their cultural-religious contexts. Instead of demanding the right to choose a spouse, which is a modern ideal (see Illuz, 1997) that reflects individualism and free choice, they struggle for this right using a different voice, the voice of Islam, a highly legitimate text that cannot be argued with.

However, they also combine modern sources, such as “science,” to explain the psychological aspects of this phenomenon. This adoption of scientific tools, among others, as modern tools for creating change is parallel to the case of Palestinian activists in other villages in Israel, who adopt education and a stance of intellectualism to legitimize their vision that activism should replace older and more traditional forms of authority. Intellectualism enables them to evaluate society not only as insiders (Palestinians), but also through an outsider’s perspective, since intellectualism provides them with a broader viewpoint on society (Faier, 2005).

The social activism of Bedouin women, as expressed in this paper, can be seen as part of what Sa’ar calls “liberal bargaining.” Such bargaining takes place when:

some members of marginalized groups internalize liberal epistemology to maximize security and optimize their life options. They strategize to materialize whatever limited benefits they may extract from their disadvantaged position in the liberal order (2005:681).

In conclusion, Bedouin women’s organizations conduct a liberal bargain with patriarchy. They bargain with the patriarchy through exercising the democratic



right to resist through civil action. As Sa'ar states, "The internalization of models of thinking and knowing is central to the working of the liberal bargain" (2005:681). In this sense, Bedouin women have internalized modern tools by using democratic rules in the community arena. Through their agency, Bedouin women hybridize internal and external elements without having to fear a loss of belonging to the community. Instead, they encourage reflexive invention of activism in their own terms.

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