

**UC Berkeley**  
**GAIA Books**

**Title**

The Struggle of Bedouin-Arab Women in a Transitional Society

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5fd390b0>

**Author**

al-Krenawi, Alean

**Publication Date**

2002-07-15

**The Struggle of Bedouin - Arab Women in a Transitional Society**

**Alean Al-Krenawi, PhD  
Spitzer Department of Social Work and Director of  
The Center for Bedouin Studies and Development  
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev  
Beer-Sheva, 84105**

## The Struggle of Bedouin -Arab Women in Transitional Society

"Bedouin" is the general name for all Arabic-speaking tribes in the Middle East and North Africa that originate from the Arabian peninsula (*Jazirat-Al-Arab*). The name is rooted in the word *Badia*, which means "desert." Kay (1978) describes the Bedouin as follows:

...nomadic Arabs who live by rearing sheep and camels in the deserts of the Middle East... The word "Bedouin" is the Western version of the Arabic word *badawiyin* which means "inhabitants of the desert," the *Badia*. Strictly speaking the term "Bedouin" should only be applied to the noble camel herding tribes, but again it has been used as a general term in English to cover all nomadic Arabs (p.7).

Although Bedouin-Arabs are distinct from other inhabitants in the Arab world because they inhabit deserts, this should not infer a unified racial, ethnic, or national group with a homogeneous lifestyle. The Bedouin -Arab presence extends from Saudi Arabia and Egypt to Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, among other countries (Barakat, 1993). The Bedouin -Arabs in the Middle East regard themselves as members of tribes that descend from two ancestral branches: Adnan and Kahtan (sometimes called Qais and Yemen). There is no specific statistical data on the number of Bedouin -Arab in the Middle East because of the rapid and dramatic process of sedentarization that Bedouin society has been undergoing for the last three decades (Al -Krenawi, 2000a; Fabietti, 199; Hana, 1984).

These societies have been described as possessing a "high context culture" – meaning that more social force accrues to the collective versus the individual, thus they appear authoritarian and group oriented rather than egalitarian and individualistic. A slower pace of societal change and greater sense of social stability have been observed (Al -Krenawi, 1998a). To a considerable extent, social status, safety from economic hardship and the potential for personal development continue to be founded upon tribal identity. In contrast to the Western liberal concept of individual autonomy, Bedouin -Arab identity is inextricably linked with the collective identity of the family, extended family and the tribe (Al -Krenawi, 2000a).

Dynamic social harmony is the prime social goal governing all meaningful interpersonal relationship, an objective that requires varying degrees of social cooperation, adaptation, accommodation and collaboration by all individuals in the social hierarchy – a system in which rank and role are based more on family membership, gender and age than on qualification and ability. A hierarchical order is maintained within the family in which there is dominance of male over female, and elder over younger. Age and life experience are associated with wisdom and competency (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Gender differences in Bedouin-Arab society are distinctly defined; gender segregation is widespread and the social structure is patriarchal, asserting male authority in the household, the economy, and the polity (Al-Krenawi, 1999; Abu-Lughod, 1986).

### ***Bedouin-Arab Social Organization***

Bedouin-Arab society is divided into units of different sizes based upon kinship and matrilineal descent. The division of the Bedouin-Arab social scale goes from the lar gest to the smallest entity. A confederation (*qabilah*) or nation is the largest unit and includes a group of tribes joined together in a union. In actuality, this is only an informal association of tribes, which offers a feeling of union and a sense of belonging to one 'polity', as each tribe has its own settlement area. The next division is the tribe- *ashira* – a union of families (*al-ial*) that remain together, wandering, shepherding, and working the land on a communal basis. Next is the *hamula*, – a patrilineal kinship structure of several generations that extends to a wide network of blood relations in the extended family (parents, siblings, their spouses and children) and the nuclear family (the married couple and their children).

Families are led by fathers while the *hamula* and tribes are directed by forums of male elders who ultimately defer to the patrilineal head – called the *mukhtar*, *shaykh*, or *za'im* (Barakat, 1993). The *hamula* is the core family unit in Arab, not only Bedouin society, and constitutes the locus of blood bonds, internal commitment, and responsibilities to the collective. The patrilineal head controls and defends family cohesion inside and outside the group; acts as a family referee in instances of internal

family disputes; strengthens interfamily solidarity and support; and is the family's principal ambassador vis-a-vis outsiders (Ginat, 1987).

There are specific characteristics that distinguish Bedouin -Arab culture. One is tribal cohesion (*asabiyya*) – a feature based upon both blood and symbiotic ties that highlight the significance of *nasab* (kinship ties) as described by Ibn -Khalidun (Dhaouadi, 1990). Another is chivalry, (*furussiyya*). Bedouin-Arabs assign great importance to the socialization of tribal members to be chivalrous, for social and ecological reasons. The emphasis is on courage, gallantry, power, fierceness and confrontation as well as other similar traits. Bedouin -Arabs are also renowned for their legendary hospitality (*karam*). Yet another value is simplicity – perception of Bedouin -Arab lifestyle as synonymous with naturalness, austerity and the dignified control over emotion in public situations (Barakat, 1993; Dhaouadi, 1990).

Issues are constructed in the context of the group, not the individual. Thus, group members are drawn together in common pursuit of group activities. Likewise, major life decisions such as whom to marry, where to live, the range of acceptable occupations are all determined with strong reference to, or often by the collective (Al -Krenawi, 2000a ). Family members have commitments to one another even if there is a dispute or disagreement among themselves – an attitude reflected in the Arab proverb: "Blood never becomes water"; should 'the family' have a dispute with an outsider, nothing must take priority over collective bonding in support of 'the family'. Individuals live in an interdependent relationship within their family, viewing themselves as an extension of a collective core identity (Al -Krenawi, 1998a).

Age and gender are important in determining external and internal boundaries. While a teenage boy may more easily socialize with peers outside the home, a girl would not be allowed such freedom. Within the family itself, the mother or grandmother may possess mediating influences in social roles. For instance, they may strongly dissuade a teenage daughter from wearing certain clothing or help form family coalitions in order to mobilize family pressure. Likewise, the same daughter may, for example,

enlist a mother or grandmother to mediate between herself and her father, in order to convince the father to agree to an activity the daughter wants to undertake.

Women's social status is strongly contingent upon being married and rearing children, especially bearing male offspring, who contribute to a woman's social status as well as to her economic well-being throughout her life. Thus, the presence of boys and expectations for future good fortune are inextricably linked (Marx, 1987). According to cultural values, few sons or an inability to have sons is always thought to be the fault of the mother, not the father (Al-Krenawi, 1998b, 1999). In case of divorce, the husband is entitled to custody of all the children, irrespective of their ages (Al-Krenawi, 1998b). As a result, many women will endure undesirable marital situations rather than face separation from their children. A divorced woman also knows that she can marry again only as a second, third or fourth wife, or as the wife of an old man (Al-Krenawi, 1998b). The mother is perceived as the emotional hub of her nuclear family, responsible for tending to her husband's needs and nurturing the children. While she wields tremendous emotional power and often acts as the relational and communication link between father and children, nevertheless, she has little public power and authority, and must defer to the wishes of her husband, his parents and the elders in the husband's extended family (Al-Krenawi, 2000a).

### Bedouin-Arab Women in the Negev

#### ***Pre-1948***

The woman's status within Bedouin society was based upon her ability to be a partner in both the social and economic sphere. The Bedouin in the Negev were semi-nomads, searching for water for their herds of sheep, goats and camels during the dry season, while remaining in one locale for the rest of the year and engaging in agriculture. The underlying key was the traditional ownership of land and thus the woman's importance in the field. This feature of productive life stands in contrast to the common belief that Bedouin did not farm. In fact, data registered during the British Mandate show that Bedouin

planted over a quarter of a million acres of wheat in the Negev in 1947 (Yiftachel, 2000). This statistic serves as a backdrop for understanding division of labor in the traditional Bedouin household: The woman was responsible for tending livestock, utilizing their by-products for home use and consumption, while also caring for family members. Thus, the woman was actively involved in the welfare of the family in both social and economic matters. She might also utilize her skills in embroidery or rug-making in order to earn some extra money by selling her wares, but for the most part the Bedouin woman was primarily occupied in the home. Her active participation in all phases of home life made her a valued member of society and her status was commensurate to her input.

### ***Post 1948 Bedouin -Arab Women***

After the war in 1948, a major shift occurred in the social, economic and political dynamics within Bedouin society in general and the family in particular. Approximately 98% of the land was confiscated directly by the government, or sold at under market price; as a result of the loss of land the woman who had previously been an integral part of economic life, suddenly found herself redundant. Deprived of such a core role depreciated their value, making women the object of belittlement and degradation at the hands of male peers and burdening them with the sense that they were an economic burden on their families.

The degree of change in the woman's position in Bedouin -Arab society today in Israel hinges to a great extent on whether the woman resides in a recognized or 'unrecognized' village. 'Unrecognized villages' have sprung up in the Negev, housing clusters initiated by Bedouin inhabitants without government sanction or planning - localities where traditional patterns of life are more 'viable' due to geographic isolation and the lack of basic social services of recognized municipalities such as schools, roads, health clinics, running water, etc. By the 1990's, the government completed building seven urban-style villages (Rahat, Tel Sheva, Kseiffa, Aroer, Lagiya, Hura and Segev Shalom) earmarked for Bedouin settlement, but planned and constructed by the government without any input or consideration

of Bedouin culture and way of life. Beyond aspirations to uphold traditional values, a host of demographic and economic factors have also pressured Bedouin to seek their own housing solutions on 'freeland'. The fact that the Bedouin do not have title ownership over much of the land they occupy in the Negev, is the crux of protracted disputes between the government and the Bedouin). In the transition of Bedouin society from a semi-nomadic to a technologically-modern society, within a short space of time (a transition still in process) Bedouin women found themselves without any support system, plan of action or financial aid to help them cope with the multiple problems they face. Among the problems that have arisen: lack of employable skills, lack of education, marriage at an early age, the continuation of a traditional lifestyle in marriage and family frameworks without the tools for coping with change. Moreover, male power and authority has been maintained by utilizing the process of transition to women's detriment – further entrenching male dominance.

In urban-style settlements, the time-consuming activities tied to the agricultural cycle and semi-nomadic domestic life have disappeared. Women in urban-type settlements no longer work in the fields, nor do they have to cook meals from scratch or handcraft domestic goods; they purchase foodstuffs and housewares in the town markets. Traditional handicrafts such as rug-making and embroidery, once created to beautify one's home, give as gifts or sell as a source of supplementary income, are no longer part of such women's reality. For women in urban-type settlements, loss of traditional roles has been accompanied by opportunities to assume new occupations that constitute a decisive change and challenge to Bedouin social norms: A growing number of women in the recognized villages have gained an education and some even seek to continue their studies on the college or university level. In some cases, the enhanced educational and occupational status of female Bedouin women has created an imbalance within the Bedouin family, when a girl enrolls in the university while her brothers remain in low-skill, low-status manual occupations. This process, which threatens male dominance of the family unit, can lead to conflict between siblings and in some cases, female students report being treated badly by their brothers due to jealousy. In addition to countless female undergraduates who are now turning to



teaching, social work and even nursing as a professional goal, there are 26 female Bedouin students completing their master degrees and three PhD candidates at Ben-Gurion University. It seems that women students are all acutely aware of the changes in the *status quo* that passage into academia; Bedouin students study in to become teachers defined higher education as 'their sword'.

However, because of cultural norms, working outside of the home is still not an option for many Bedouin women living in geographically dispersed villages. In the unrecognized villages, their additional framework of values and lifestyle are largely maintained – marriage and care giving roles, although women play a greatly diminished economic role. Traditional loyalty patterns have also been disrupted by new settlement patterns – recognized and unrecognized villages: Urban-style towns have positioned women from various tribes as neighbors – not only proximity with tribes they had no former connection with, but even between tribes engaged in protracted blood feuds. Women in unrecognized villages live in separated family units, although they are able to continue some of their traditional household duties, such as animal husbandry in some families. Although women in the recognized villages are largely unemployed, a growing number do seek alternative ways of acquiring some form of education or employable skills. In the unrecognized villages, the Bedouin woman remains largely 'hidden away' – uneducated and married off at a young age, laid down with child-bearing and child-rearing and totally void of marketable skills for employment outside the home.

In essence, in both recognized and unrecognized villages, the overwhelming majority of women – stripped of their traditional roles, lacking the education and skills necessary for other gainful employment and discouraged from seeking work outside of the home due to social norms – have become an economic burden, dependent on male breadwinners and reduced to one of the lowest rungs in Bedouin-Arab society – itself, the poorest sector on Israel's socioeconomic ladder.

What is occurring in the transition process is the maintenance – even the entrenchment of the traditional system of power, authority and family values due to the diminished status and diminished autonomy of most women – a phenomenon that keeps traditional concepts of purity and the place of

women in society in place, despite the changes that have been overtaking this society. These social values and rituals influence the way most women think of themselves within their society and have a strong impact on their self-perception and psychological state.

### Marriage

One of the areas that has witnessed little change within Bedouin -Arab society is marriage patterns and rituals and women's link to purity. Marriage in Bedouin -Arab society is based upon an agreement between two families, not just a vow exchanged by a couple. As a result, the marriage process entails many factors in choosing a partner such as the stature of the girl's family, wealth and social status of the girls' father and brothers. Moreover, Islam encourages Bedouin -Arab to marry and have children as early as possible. The couple may know each other prior to marriage but cannot be together unaccompanied. There is no dating or courtship as in the Western tradition, nor is 'love' seen as a prerequisite for marriage. In fact, as Denny (1985) states:

“Romantic love is regarded as a feeble basis for something as important as marriage. The Muslim view is that love should grow after marriage. but at the outset the most important basis for marriage are commitment, honor, mutual respect and friendship” (p.301).

Courtship, engagement and the marriage process vary among Bedouin -Arabs in the Middle East.

In some localities, cultural mediators are used as 'gobetween's' between the two families while in other places some families go by themselves to ask the girl's parents for their daughter's hand in marriage (see Hana, 1984; Moors, 1995). One should keep in mind that there are differences between regions and countries that hinge on level of education and acculturation of family members.

The common issue for all families is the dowry (in Arabic the *mahr* or *siag*) – agreement about payment of a sum of money by the groom's parents to the bride's family. The sum varies from family to family and is based upon hierarchy in the blood relationship. The agreed amount of *mahr* is stipulated in

the marriage contract and given directly to the bride's family at the time of the marriage. It should be noted that mediators also play a role in the process of determining the sum of the *mahr*. Women do, however, have a great deal to say about the marriage – often initiating marriage proceedings 'behind the scene' and covertly preparing the groundwork for the formal arrangement between the two families.

### ***Types of marriage in Bedouin -Arab society***

Most of the Middle Eastern marriage systems are endogamous. Women are considered as symbols of purity for the family, lineage and tribe. As symbols of honor, women are protected and guarded by men and one of the prime vehicles for maintaining this protection is to retain women 'within the group'. As a result, the majority of marriages are arranged for girls in their early teens by their parents or parent-substitutes without prior consultation with the girl concerned – and in some cases, despite her objections. Because of the structure of Bedouin -Arab society and the different social levels within the society, marriages consummated out of love bonds are rare. In fact, if a daughter is suspected of being in love with a man, her father may physically punish her and will surely impose severe restrictions on her freedom of movement and communication in order to ensure the relationship will be terminated.

One type of marriage is the 'exchange marriage' (*badal*) which occurs when two men are married to each other's sisters. Interfamilial, intra-*hamula* marriage may occur when a man is persuaded to marry a woman from his extended family. This may occur if someone from another tribe wishes to marry a woman of the tribe but is considered by the extended family to be an unsuitable or inferior match; the family members will then try to find a man from within the extended family or the tribe to marry the woman to, instead. By accepting such a marriage, the 'suitable candidate' solves the family's problem.

Another type of marriage is *attia*, often common among cousins. The father and a relative agree upon the marriage arrangement when the children are young and the intended bride and groom learn of the decision for marriage as they grow up.

Males in Bedouin -Arab society have a commitment to marry their female relatives even though they do not love them. They may have to marry another wife in order to protect the extended family's honor, which is a very important principle from the Bedouin -Arab perspective. This is a matter of dignity and family honor since the main goal is to keep women within the extended family and tribe (Abu-Khusa, 1994). Consequently, polygamy may take place in some cases. That means while already married, a man may take a second wife out of loyalty to the extended family, to solve a 'family dilemma'.

If a man takes several wives, thus becoming the joint head of several households, he takes turns living with each wife. Generally, each wife has her own separate abode where she lives and rears her children separately, but if the women get along well, there are cases where a husband combines his family in one large household.

Polygamy (Al -Krenawi, 1998b) has become more prevalent among Bedouin -Arab men in recent years. Recent research on women in polygamous marriages (Al -Krenawi, 1999) compares senior and junior wives from polygamous marriages, highlighting the psychosocial impact of polygamy on them - particularly the dynamics that exist between senior and junior wives. For example, sociolinguistic connotations may have a strong emotional and psychological impact on the first wife: The term among the Bedouin for the senior wife is "old wife", for junior wife "young wife" - labels that reflect association of youth with beauty and femininity, but equally undermine the self-esteem of senior wives (Al-Krenawi et al., 1997). Even more detrimental to the perception of the first wife are the assumptions made when a man takes a second wife. The senior wife may be perceived as 'unable to fulfill her wifely obligations' (Al -Krenawi, 2001) and thus the negative impact for her is two -fold: on the immediate and personal level and the broader family, extended family, and community level. The husband's remarriage, therefore, becomes a double insult to the senior wife, on both the psychological and the social plane (Al -Krenawi, 2001).

Several factors motivate Bedouin -Arab to have more than one wife. Anthropologists distinguish between 'wealth -creating polygamy', where women's domestic labor *generates* wealth; and 'sororal polygamy' - which more aptly describes the men's situation in Bedouin society - where wealth *allows for* more than one wife. The Bedouin -Arab culture is a "fraternal interest group" associated with higher incidences of polygamy in which "women [could be] imported... from other communities" to live in male-centered residences" (White, 1988, p. 875). Some male Bedouin, indeed, marry Arab women from the northern part of Israel, Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco.

Frequent and often intense competition and jealousy occurs between co -wives, as well as between the children of each wife (Al -Krenawi, 1998a; Al -Krenawi & Lightman, 2000). This takes place mainly as a result of competition for the husband's social and economic support. Such a crimony can, in turn, exacerbate marital tension (Al -Krenawi et al., 1997). Indeed, the introduction of a junior wife is viewed as a divisive factor that splits the family into two sub -families.

It should be stressed that Bedouin -Arab culture encourages polygamy, in part because of its perceived association with increased procreation and in part because it promotes extension of tribal/ *hamula* familial networks. In contrast to scholars whose male sexual appetite is the 'driving force' behind polygamy (White 1988, p. 871), studies show that wives in the Bedouin -Arab society perceive this aspect as the principal motivation for polygamy. While from the perspective of wives in Bedouin -Arab society this is the principal advantage of polygamy - in terms of the sharing the burden of 'wifely duties', perhaps also serving as a form of 'birth control' (Al -Krenawi & Graham, 1999).

#### Women's Purity and Ritual in Bedouin Society

In Bedouin -Arab culture, women are reputed to be closely associated with temptation and seduction. Temptation is embodied in the principal Islamic evil spirit called *Iblis*. Muslims believe that *Iblis* is capable of tempting and misleading them, hence the saying: "Whenever a man encounters a woman, Satan is also present" (i.e. Satan is the offspring of *Iblis* in the Muslim pantheon). To safeguard the honor of the family, in violation of tradition has restricted married woman's social ties to the family unit. A

woman must not be absent from her husband's home, except for everyday obligations. Females learn these rules by heart in childhood and restrictions gradually become more severe as they mature to womanhood. (Mass & Al-Krenawi, 1994).

The woman's value in Bedouin-Arab society is based upon the concept of *ard* (honor) – a principle that has deep roots in Bedouin-Arab society. In English the word is translated as 'a woman's honor' but in Bedouin-Arab society it carries a much broader meaning – tied to times passed when the strength and ability of a man was tested primarily in his ability to deter strangers from looting his property and raping his women. It also means that the man has no debtor 'moral stain' upon his honor (Al-Krenawi & Wiesel-Lev, 1999).

Clothing or a modest dress code is one of the ways Bedouin society maintains control over the woman. Since the woman is considered sacred – a repository of family honor (*ard*), she is expected to dress modestly, envelop herself in outer clothing as a means of protecting herself by maintaining social distances as a technique for ensuring her purity and preventing her desecration. Women living in the unrecognized villages continue to maintain traditional dress codes, covering their face while in areas of non-family members, particularly in proximity to non-Bedouin males. A modest dress code has special significance in urban-style villages where the transition process of Bedouin women has caused closer contact with non-agnate male members; logically, one would expect a stricter dress code for women under such circumstances, in order to protect the young girls' family honor. In practice, however, this is not always the case: Many females of the younger generation dress in a more Western style, in jeans and blouses – but, they continue to cover their heads. It is interesting to note that changes in outer headgear in recent years – the growing popularity of the *hijab*. This traditional religious headress in lieu of a simple kerchief, is worn by nearly all university and college students, as well as many of the younger women. It not only reflects the growing impact of a more orthodox and militant Islam on the Bedouin-Arab community; female Bedouin students use this cultural-religious marking as a form of 'leverage' – a sign of respect and acceptance of the cultural and

religious norms and values which they 'exchange' for permission to study at the university – a lifeline for women from a traditional Bedouin viewpoint.

Within the insular confines of women's world – separate from the man's world, there are specific codes which teach children their prescribed roles in society, as well (Al-Krenawi 1996). One of the codes focuses on circumcision ( *thoor* or purification) associated with the key construction of womanhood (Al-Krenawi & Wiesel-Lev, 1999). The ritual is so fundamental that many times the father and husband are not aware that the ritual – still viewed by women as “a rite of passage from childhood, signifying that the woman is pure and is therefore ready to take her full place in Bedouin – Arab society” – has taken place.

Although there are a number of forms of circumcision, whatever the form, the outcome is mutilation that often impacts on women's marital relationships, as well as their personal physical and psychological wellbeing. Beyond the pain of the act itself, circumcised women may experience pain during intercourse and seek to avoid sex as much as possible, leading to feelings of rejection by their husbands – whom may respond by taking a second wife. Thus, the psychological trauma for the women is doubled: both a blow to herself – esteem as well as reduction in her status in the eyes of her husband and her family.

A pilot study on women's attitudes towards circumcision – among women who had undergone the ritual, others who viewed the ritual and some who only heard about it – found Bedouin women have mixed feelings about this 'rite of passage': Some were afraid of the ritual, some believed they would be impure if they did not undergo the ritual, and others were strongly opposed to circumcision. Due to the secrecy and sensitivity surrounding the topic, the informants had to be assured absolute anonymity.

Although the study results are tentative, the pilot is important for it takes the ritual 'out into the open' enabling girls to know what is involved, allowing them to make an informed decision about the desirability of undergoing this ritual. Although the study results are preliminary, the pilot is an important step for it helps take the ritual 'out into the open' as a debatable issue – an 'option', not a 'given'.

Indicative of changing attitudes, one study has found that education impacts on the practice of this ritual

among the Bedouin of the Negev; and more educated females possess more negative attitudes toward FGM ritual.

### **The Family Dynamic**

The family is considered sacred to Bedouin -Arab life and is the locus of decision -making regarding major life events (whom to marry, where to live, choice of groom, what career to pursue). Health and psychosocial problems likewise, are collectively articulated and resolved within family structures. Bedouin -Arab society tends to be patriarchal –the father, as the head of the family reigning as a dominant, powerful, charismatic figure (Marx, 1987) who commands subordination and respect as the legitimate authority for all family matters (Al -Krenawi, 1999). To the outsider, roles within families and between family members and their environment might appear to be rigid and inflexible –often assumed to be part of a “defense mechanism” against strangers, viewed by the Bedouin with suspicion as intruders. Although family structures, like other social relations in Bedouin -Arab society, may be authoritative and hierarchical, in this instance, one should be cautious about too overt an application of professional terminology. Take the notion of ‘closed’ and ‘open’ families, for instance: If practitioners/researchers proceed with unchecked biases, they may wrongfully infer a family is “closed” –that is, that a family has strict regulations limiting external transactions with the external environmental, incoming and outgoing objects, information, and ideas (Hepworth & Larsen, 1986). Yet, as a result of the socio -cultural, political and economic change that the Bedouin -Arab society face, Bedouin-Arab families may be far more ‘open’ – that is, more accepting of external influence than is generally considered. Two prime examples are the acceptance of primary, secondary, and higher education for children, and acceptance of outside personnel such as social workers .

The ‘unindividuated self’ –the psychological autonomy and individuation that many Western psychosocial theories describe –bear only limited relevance to the pattern of psychosocial development common to collectivist Bedouin -Arabic cultures (Al -Krenawi, 1998a). The Bedouin -Arab’s identity is more strongly derived from the family; a person’s self -concept is enmeshed in the family concept; and an



individual's needs, attitudes, and values stem from those of the family. And so, if on one hand, a family member contradicts social norms, the entire family may be seen as having been shamed; on the other hand, if a male family member is successful in professional or remunerative terms in an occupation, his successes bring credit to the entire family (Al-Krenawi, 2000b). There is some evidence of a change in attitudes towards the accomplishments of female family members: One can observe cases of parents of women who have studied or graduated from university, who exhibit a sense of pride in their daughter's achievements, as well.

Expression of emotions in Bedouin-Arab society, as in other Arab societies, is not encouraged, at least not in public. People tend to avoid expressing negative emotions such as anger and jealousy towards family members (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Individuals are expected to exhibit emotions congruent to societal norms and hide authentic expressions. Other emotions are expressed through acting out behaviors away from the attention of others or through body language. Communication styles are restrained, impersonal, and formalistic rather than overt, personal, and expressive (Al-Krenawi, 2000b).

One of the dilemmas individuals growing up in a Bedouin-Arab family may invariably experience is the choice between conformity versus self-referenced objectives. This dynamic is especially present, but it is not restricted to people during adolescence and early adulthood. When the conformist choice is adopted, the individual accepts support provided by the family and social environment in exchange for not realizing a more pronounced expression of individuality. If a self-referenced choice is made, the individual asserts that he or she has the right of self-expression and personal decision, however, social support of the family and traditional community may be reduced. Since early childhood, traditional social norms of Bedouin-Arab society may condition the individual towards choices that are seen to conform to family and community norms (Al-Krenawi, 1998b).

Pragmatism is valued over idealism, and life activity is focused on the present. Furthermore, unlike Western notions of being the master of one's own fate, Bedouin-Arab belief holds that one is not

in ultimate control –that is, the person is always an integral part of the larger encompassing universe that ultimately holds authority over one's fate.

The core unit –the family –is considered to comprise one man and one woman and any single children. Single men and women are considered to be part of the family of their kinsmen while a childless widow or divorcee will return to her paternal kin (Marx, 1987). After a son marries, he will bring his bride into his family's household and when he is at work, his wife remains under the 'supervision' of the women in his household.

Family and more particularly, spousal relations must be taken in context with the larger family matrix of relationships, "prevailing economic and political conditions, and such cultural ingredients as the accepted norms of behavior for men and women." (Marx, 1987). Relations between spouses change as the 'developmental cycle' of the family is played out, but because the careers of men and the lives of women take different paths and do not develop evenly, their lives are affected by different factors: While men's power base centers on control over corporate groups, land and herds, women achieve stature (albeit of inferior rank to men) by bearing sons, through access to family links with kinsmen, utilization/control of information and the power of persuasiveness (Marx, 1987). "A woman may enlist her relatives, her cleverness, her capacity to work, bear children or become a sexual partner, in order to enhance her power" (Marx, 1987). Again, here as well, changes are taking place in traditional relationships in Bedouin-Arab society due to the impact of Western education on males and females alike. In some cases when the woman is educated, holds a job that contributes substantially to family income, this will be reflected in spousal relationships.

Despite the high differentiation in gender roles, Bedouin women have been utilizing their limited power in a number of ways: to gain access to information, transferring information and as they mature, use their role within the family as a form of 'power' over their children. Sometimes, women also have limited access to some economic resources. While their power is based in and exercised from the domestic sphere, they may have influence over events and persons going beyond the immediate circle.

The effects of settlement and wage labor have increased gender segregation and at the same time increased women's access to other women. As men have had to go outside the home to earn a living, women have devised a close network of ties as a social outlet since they are unable to go out to work, and their husbands are away from the home most of the day. These networks are utilized for gaining knowledge of a good marriage prospect for the children – information that is necessary for the wife to hold 'power' over her husband concerning his desire for a second marriage as well as to maintain good relations within the extended family.

The role of the Bedouin woman changes as she matures. Thus, she goes from a child that is fairly free of adherence to very strict social codes for women, into adolescence where she is closely guarded by her family until she is married. As a mother with growing children, she inculcates to her offspring with traditional values such as honor and respect for elders and forms close ties with her children. (Strong material bonds severely limit the 'risks' a woman is willing and able to take, avoiding serious clashes with her husband out of fear of losing custody of her children in case of divorce). Once a woman is past childbearing age, she is viewed as being 'gender-neutral' in society and is able to move more freely among non-family male members.

Occasionally, a wife may go back to her family for a period of time in the wake of domestic conflict (usually with her mother-in-law), until tempers cool down or the husband manages to mediate the conflict between the two women. This is particularly difficult, as a man's mother will always be the first and single most important influence in her son's life even as an adult, and his decisions concerning the family – particularly conflicts between his mother and his wife – will usually be colored by the close relationship that develops between mothers and sons.

The unity of the family is exemplified by maintenance of the family household as a 'peaceful abode', a refuge that is inviolable (*haram*, from the root *mahram*, meaning 'respected' or 'sacred'). Another facet of family unity is the role assigned the woman of the house – who is allowed to entertain

guests when there is no other male around to do so. In this way, “the unity of the family thus overrides, on occasion, the customary division of labour between the sexes” (Marx, 1987).

Under the Israeli judicial system, Bedouin women like their Jewish counterparts, have the right to file suit in either the religious (Muslim or Jewish courts) courts or in Israeli civil courts in personal status matters, depending which jurisdiction serves her purpose better. Settled, more secular Bedouin couples usually utilize legal codes rather than the religious ones, particularly if a more liberal interpretation will serve their purpose better. If a Bedouin woman seeks to block her husband from marrying a second wife, she may appeal to the civil court for the Israeli civil code which forbids bigamy. Her spouse, however, can circumvent such attempts by refraining from registering his second marriage with Israeli authorities. Moreover, if his ‘legally married spouse’ does not acquiesce to a second marriage, the husband may legally divorce his first wife and then marry a second wife while continuing his relationship with his ‘ex’ -- who fearing loss of the children, has few alternatives but to agree.

#### Parent-Child Relations

In the Bedouin -Arab family fathers fulfill an authoritarian role --controlling and punishing family members if they are ‘out of line’ with community norms, or fail to obey his orders or expectations. By contrast, the mother’s role is devoted to educating, nurturing, rearing and other ‘caregiver’ functions. In this role, she not only functions as the emotional hub of the family providing love and compassion; she often serves as the mediator between the father and his children --coming to the child’s aid and even acting as a shield .

On the other hand, children must show respect for their parents and relatives through obedience and submission, and are expected to meet the expectations of their parents, their extended family and the whole community -at-large. It should be noted that in Bedouin -Arab family, as is the norm in Arab families, a child’s relatives take an active part in his or her education and nurturing thus, the message sent to the children is that one must ‘respect all elders’ within the extended family and the whole community.

As a result of extended family member taking part in the child's rearing, there are gender differences in terms of expectations. Boys are expected to be strong, brave and intelligent, while exhibiting obedience, submission and care for family members and respect for their parents and relatives. As girls embody family honor, they are expected to exhibit obedience and submission, learning from childhood how to uphold their family's honor. Girls are also socialized how to be good women in the future, by helping their mothers. Girls are allowed to show their feelings (crying) and weaknesses (fear) while boys are forbidden from demonstrating any outward signs of weakness or fear. It should be noted that many of these traits are shared with most Arab families in general.

The changes that occur in family relationships throughout the life cycle in family life also have a 'separating effect' between husband and wife in later years. For the first few years, the couple spends time adjusting to each other but in the course of time, the social pressure of rearing children, particularly sons, becomes very strong. As the sons enter their teens, the father may be more frequently absent from the home and spend more time in the company of other men (Marx, 1987). "As years went by their (husband and wife) interaction became less frequent and less intensive" (Marx, 1987).

### Sibling Relations

Age and gender influence the type of relations that occur between brothers and sisters, as is the norm in Arab society in general. The older brother is more dominant than his younger brothers and sisters regardless of his age, and boys in general, have more power in the family than their sisters. However, gender and age determine roles in Bedouin-Arab families: The older brother is expected to take care of his younger brothers and sisters during their lifespan, not just when they are children; boys are expected to care for their sisters in the family in the same manner. The older brother plays an important role, as he becomes a role model for his siblings. When his father is away, the eldest son is expected to assume the role of the head of the family in the father's absence.

From early childhood each gender learns the position and roles they are expected to fulfill for the socialization process of male children is carried out mostly among males, of girls among female family

members. Thus it might be said that there are two different worlds in Bedouin -Arab society –one for males and one for females (Abu -Lughod 1986).

### Conclusion

Regardless of the political, educational or economic changes that have occurred in the State of Israel and among Bedouin -Arab in general, the status of women in Bedouin society has not improved, and has in fact, in many aspects changed for the worse. While it might be assumed that women would be the first to benefit from rapid social changes, sedentarization and the general impact of Israeli society, this has not been the case. While it is true that the transition has exposed Bedouin society to modern Western society, it is primarily the males who are exposed due to the freedom of movement and association males enjoy, that bring them in contact with non -Bedouin society' subsequently it is they who are the ones who, in essence, decide what is fit to 'import' or adopt –a complicated selection process in the case of gender relationships and the status of women that is broader than narrow 'vested interests' of males in preservation of the status quo. Women represent the honor of the family –thus changes in their status goes beyond the fate of this or that women, impacting on core aspects of a key institution. Thus, exposure to Western values, norms and customs may threaten entrenched Bedouin values in terms of the dominant place of men in Bedouin -Arab society, but also threaten the stability of a social system that places high value on harmony (and tradition) in the first place. Consequently, women are still pushed onto the sidelines, despite going to school and even obtaining higher education. This process may lead to a conflict between the Bedouin -Arab culture and the Western dominant culture (Israeli-Jewish). In other words, the Bedouin -Arabs in Israel live in two different societies at the same time, one is considered to be non -western and the other is western. The encounter between the two cultures creates tension and a sense of conflict between the two sets of cultural values. It should be noted that such encounters have a psychosocial impact on the individual, family and the community as a whole (see Al -Krenawi, 1999).

The family structure has remained basically intact with the male head of the household still serving as the authority figure. In terms of status, men are still valued more than women, while the stature and self-image of the majority of women has been diminished by the disintegration of their traditional economic roles, leaving them unemployed and an 'economic burden'. Although identity to the tribe is loosening its hold, the individual's identity in the western sense, is still defined as a subordinate entity to the identity of a larger 'collective self' – of the extended family and tribe. One of the most salient consequences of this reality is that women are still considered figures of purity who must maintain family honor at all cost.

The differences between Bedouin women living in the urban setting and the rural villages are beginning to surface, but most are cosmetic – going no deeper than externals, the 'outershell' of western civilization. This is most visible in the recognized villages where Western modes of dress and makeup are slowly making inroads, while at the same time adoption of the *hijab* has gained favor. Probably the one most important change is that women in the more urban villages are pulling away from the tradition of home-bound inactivity to take their place in the classroom and higher level studies. This is a very slow process, but more women are seeking university studies, teaching degrees and some even branching out to the sciences. Meanwhile, with very few exceptions, women's status in unrecognized villages remains quite static.

As male authority persists, women must still bow to the authority of their fathers and their brothers' decisions. Marriage is not an option but a necessity: Women who do not marry are a 'potential threat' to their family's honor, and at the 'advanced age' of their mid-20s, Bedouin women are considered 'old' women with meager 'marriageable assets'. Only in recent years has there been some movement towards marrying outside family circles, but many in the elder generation persist in maintaining family ties through their offspring's unions.

As men accumulate more wealth, loyalty to maintenance of the extended family structure and continuing focus on procreation as a sign of higher social status, promptment to take second wives. The

tradition of keeping women pure by marriages 'with in the family' has had far reaching and disastrous consequences – first and foremost, a high incidence of congenital defects and illness in marriages between first cousins. Moreover, the zeal that prompts men to marry off women in the family at an early age to ensure their purity, often cut short the girls' education and often burdening them with the demands of premature motherhood they are ill equipped to cope with . Multiple wives often destabilize marital relationship, sparking divisiveness due to competition among between the wives and children for the husband's attention and a greater share of limited economic resources.

Another cultural ritual that remains entrenched due to the pervasive quality of the idea of 'female purity' is that of FGM. These practices surrounding female circumcision leaves uninitiated girls ignorant of what they face – amplifying the trauma of the act itself. The long -lasting negative ramifications of female circumcision on women's self -image and sense of security, and the quality of their married life is doubled by the lack of autonomy young women often face in subjecting themselves to the ritual:

Because the woman is still perceived through the prism of the family rather than the individual, what she does or does not do will ultimately reflect upon the family as a whole. Thus, she has no choices in regard to rituals that the family chooses to continue, resulting in additional damage to the psychological and mental health of Bedouin -Arab women due to the persistence of this custom .

The fact that women must find alternative means of association and networking among women as well as creating some power role within the family ultimately tend to weaken the family as a unit. This is further amplified by the shift towards separate circles that husband and wife engage in as they grow older and their children mature .

For the most part, outward signs of women's advancement appear more in the recognized villages – in Western dress, continuation in education and the woman's ability to create ways of change while working 'with in the cultural system'. Some examples are: utilizing the female network to gain permission to study and live in a student dormitory in the city of Beersheva; or support to marry a man of her choice rather than one chosen by the family – and, although still a scarce phenomena, the use of



the support network to marry someone outside of the family/tribal structure. These harbingers are mostly non-existent in unrecognized villages where more conservative and traditional practices are still strong.

The fact that Bedouin -Arabs continue their traditions, customs and rituals despite the fact that they are living in a modern, Western -oriented political, social and educational system needs to be closely examined. There appears to be tension between the desire to gain entrance to mainstream Israeli life and all the material benefits that accrue from this and the Bedouin's desire to retain their identity, culture and traditions. It may well be that the rationale behind resistance to full transformation emanates from the inherent threat of loss of one's identity inherent in the Bedouin's unique 'predicament' -complicated by their status as members of a national and cultural minority who are inhabitants of a country where modernity is tightly intertwined with a non -Arab (i.e. Jewish) identity.

Another question that needs further investigation is the reason(s) behind men's desire (and some women's support) for persistence in polygamous marriages and marriage among closer relatives within the family, despite growing awareness of medical research warning of the high prevalence of hereditary defects -both physical and mental, among offspring of inbred families due to genetic factors, and studies that underscore the added stresses of living in a polygamous environment entails. From the standpoint of women in Bedouin society, severely handicapped children constitute but another stressor; ultimately, it is the mothers whom must bear the brunt of lifetime care for such offspring, in addition to the blow to the parent's progeny in light of the fact that such a child will probably not marry and carry on family tradition.

How these factors will be played out in the transition process -an ongoing process, remains to be seen, but it is very possible that one key element may rest on the social and political standing and economic perks that the government offers Bedouin within the State in the future. That means it may rest on the degree to which renouncement of ancient traditions will be rewarded in first class citizenship and the concrete economic, social and political rewards it carries.

It will also depend on if and to what degree the Bedouin, for their part, are open to change, whether they are willing to develop and adapt their lives to a more modern increasingly globalized world. One can view the status of women within Bedouin society and attitudes towards Bedouin women in general as a touchstone – a clear and crucial collision point in the dynamic tension that accompanies the struggle between maintaining a uniquely Bedouin – Arab identity and embracing western modernization.

## References

- AbuKhusa,A.(1994). *The tribes of Beer -Sheva*. Amman: Al -Matbah Al -Watania. [In Arabic].
- Abu-Lughod,L.(1986). *Veiled sentiments: Honor and p oetry in a Bedouin society* .Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Al Krenawi,A.(2001). Women from polygamous and monogamous marriages in an out -patient psychiatric clinic. *Transcultural Psychiatry* , 38(2),187 -199.
- Al Krenawi,A.(2000a). *Ethno-Psychiatry among Bedouin -Arab of the negev* .Tel -Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (in Hebrew).
- Al Krenawi,A.(2000b). Bedouin -Arab clients' use of proverbs in the therapeutic setting . *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 22 (2),91 -102.
- Al Krenawi,A.(1999). Social workers practicing in their Non -Western home communities: Overcoming conflict between professional and cultural values. *Families in Society*, 80 (5),488 -495.
- Al Krenawi,A.(1998a). Reconciling Western Treatment and Traditional Healing: A Social Worker Walks with the Wind. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* 4 (3):6 -21.
- Al Krenawi,A.(1998b). Family Therapy with a Multiparental/Multisposal Family. *Family Process*, 37(1):65-81.
- Al Krenawi,A.(1995). A study of the dual use of modern and traditional mental health systems by the Bedouin-Arab of the Negev. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.
- Al Krenawi,A.,&Graham,J.R.(2000). Culturally sensitive social work practice with Arab clients in mental health settings . *Health & Social Work*, 25 (1),9 -22.
- Al Krenawi,A.,&Lightman,E.S.(2000). Learning achievement, social Adjustment, and Family Conflict Among Bedouin -Arab Children From Polygamous and Monogamous Families. *Social Psychology*, 14 0(3),345 -355.
- Al Krenawi,A.,&Graham,J.R.(1999). Gender and biomedical/traditional mental health utilization among the Bedouin -Arab of the Negev. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 23 (2),219 -243.
- Al Krenawi,A.,&Lev -Wiesel,R.(1999). Attitudes toward perceived psychosocial impact of female circumcision practiced among the Bedouin -Arab of Israel. *Family Process*, 38 (4),431 -443.
- Al Krenawi,A.,Graham,J.R.,&Al -Krenawi,S.(1997). Social work practice with polygamous families. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 14 (6),445 -458.
- Barakat,H.(1993). *The Arab world: Society, culture and state* .Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Dhaouadi, M. (1990). Ibn -Khalidun: The Founding Father of Eastern Sociology. *International Sociology*, 5(3), 319 -335.
- Denny, F. (1985). *An introduction to Islam*. New York: Macmillian.
- Fabiatti, U. (1991). Control of Resources and Social Cohesion. The Role of the Bedouin Domestic Group. *Nomadic Peoples*, 28, 18 -27.
- Ginat, J. (1987). *Blood disputes among Bedouin and rural Arabs in Israel: Revenge, mediation, outcasting and family honor*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Hana, N. S. (1984). *The desert societies in the Arab world*. Cairo: Daar Al -Marif (in Arabic)
- Hepworth, D. H., & Larsen, J. A. (1986). *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills*. Kingsport: Kingsport Press.
- Kay, S. (1978). *The Bedouin*. New York: Crane Rvssak.
- Marx, E. (1987). Relations between Spouses among the Negev Bedouin. *Ethnos*, 52(1-2), 156 -179.
- Mass, M., & Al -Krenawi, A. (1994). When a man encounters a woman, Satan is also present: Clinical relationships in Bedouin society. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 64 (3), 357 -367.
- Moors, A. (1995). *Women, Property and Islam: Palestinian Experiences, 1920 -1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- White, D. R. (1998a). Rethinking polygamy: Co -wives, codes and cultural systems. *Current Anthropology*, 29 (4), 529 -572.
- Yiftachel, O. (2000). "Ethnocracy" and its discontents: Minorities, protests, and the Israel policy. *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (4), 725 -756.