



Position Paper: Perspectives on Arab-Bedouin Women Employment in the Negev/Naqab

This position paper will address the main obstacles that make it difficult for Arab-Bedouin women in the Negev to integrate into the labor market. The overall decisions of the Israeli government and the resulting programs designated to raise employment rates in the Arab society, did not produce the desired results among Arab-Bedouin women from the Negev. Despite broad government investment and program development, in 2016 the employment rate among Bedouin women aged 25-64 was only 19.2 percent.¹ The explicit commitment to the OECD, which was reflected in Government Decision No. 1994, stipulated that the rate of employment of Arab women would reach 41% by 2020.²

However, none of the designated programs for the Bedouin population have secondary goals for the desired rate of employment for women, so to ensure the plan is implemented successfully.³ There is a necessity to produce indicators that will determine the effectiveness of the various government plans, as well as a need for a governmental agency that will provide an overall review and progress report of the plans. Moreover, these plans must address the specific barriers that Arab-Bedouin women experience when attempting to enter the labor market.

The Bedouin society in the Negev suffers from economic hardship and severe poverty. A major difficulty is reflected in the labor market, where many members of the Bedouin society suffer from disadvantage when competing for places in the labor market, among other reasons due to exclusion and discrimination against them. As women in an ethnic minority, Arab-Bedouin women in the Negev are subject to discrimination and double exclusion, which

forces them into poverty, unemployment or low-wage jobs and inappropriate working conditions. The urbanization of the Bedouin society in the Negev, which began in the 1970's of the previous century, was an enforced move by the Israeli government who did not consider the delicate social and cultural fabric of the traditional Bedouin society, as well as the negative impact this process might have on Bedouin women in the Negev. The government-planned Bedouin townships suffer from poor investment in infrastructure and lack of vocational training and insufficient educational facilities, which lead to a severe shortage of employment sources within the townships. Since the Bedouin society was (and remains) dependent on the Jewish labor market, Bedouin women lost most of their employment opportunities. The women were left at home because most of them were illiterate and unable to command the Hebrew language.⁴

The seven governmental-townships did not offer modern infrastructures that would ease the transition from a traditional society to a modern one. On the contrary, these townships are a symbol of failed urban planning that does not consider the needs of the communities for which it was built in the first place. They are an example of the lack of investment in infrastructure and budgetary discrimination against the Arab society.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that these townships are at the bottom of Israel's socio-economic rankings.⁶

Tens of thousands of residents living on their lands in villages that the State of Israel refuses to recognize, remain in a more challenging situation than those in the recognized villages and townships. Due to the State of Israel's failure to recognize these villages, thousands of

¹ Shelly Mizrahi Simon, 2016. *Employment of Arab women*. The Knesset Research and Data Center <https://tinyurl.com/ubz38duj> [Hebrew]

² Government Resolution No. 1994 of 15.07.2010 *Employment Goals for 2010-2020*.

³ Adalya, 2016. *Strategic plan for socio-economic promotion of the Bedouin population in the Negev/Naqab. Stage B – defining core issues and strategic directions*, page 47.

⁴ Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2006. *Between tradition and modernization: understanding the problem of female Bedouin dropouts*. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27(1): 3-17.

⁵ Tovi Fenster, 1999. *Space for Gender: Cultural Roles of the Forbidden and the Permitted*. *Environment and Planning D Society and Space* (17): 227-246.

⁶ For further information: Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, 2017. *Discrimination in numbers: Collection of statistical data- The Bedouin community in the Negev/Naqab*.



Arab-Bedouin citizens are deprived of social and political rights and face additional barriers to integration into the labor market. These barriers extend the period in search of jobs, and this can lead to despair and lack of belief in the ability to find employment and start working, or alternatively, return to work.⁷

According to a report by the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality,⁸ the participation of Arab-Bedouin women in the labor force is much lower than that of other populations in Israel. In 2015, 16% of Bedouin women in the Negev age 15 and over, were part of the labor force, compared with 27% among all Arab women in Israel, and 64% among Jewish women from the Negev. The rate of participation in the labor market has increased over the years among Jewish women living in the Negev and Arab women in the rest of the country, but rates among Bedouin women in the Negev, at least in the past decade, seem to fluctuate, and there is no clear trend.⁹



Photo: Amal Abu al-Qi'ān, 'Atīr

Unemployment rates among the Bedouin society in the Negev is one of the highest in Israel, and according to the data, women constitute most of job seekers.¹⁰ The gaps between Bedouin women and men and between them and

their Jewish counterparts in the Negev are also evident in the level of wages, which sometimes reaches tens of percent.¹¹ An analysis of industries in which Arab-Bedouin women work shows that they are concentrated in industries with low wages, such as education, health and welfare services. The only bright spot that emerges from the findings is the rise in wage rates of Arab-Bedouin women, which have been higher than that of Jewish women in the Negev, as well as Bedouin men. However, in absolute terms, the gaps are still considerably large.

Barriers in Entering the Labor Market

Low rates of participation in the working force, as well as low wages of Arab-Bedouin women from the Negev have both institutional and cultural explanations that usually feed one another. The State's inability to provide accessible and quality educational institutions in the recognized towns and villages, but especially in the unrecognized villages, only reinforces past norms that did not attach great importance to the employment of women.¹²

Education: In the 2016/2017 school year, out of the 94 elementary schools and 41 secondary schools, only 10 elementary schools and not even one secondary school existed in the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev. That is an astonishing fact, considering that the population in these villages is about a third of the entire Bedouin society in the Negev.

Up until the previous decade, the dropout rates among young Bedouin women was above 60 percent.¹³ In a survey conducted by Siderh (a Bedouin women NGO from the township of al-Lagiyyih) in 2004 at some of the unrecognized villages, it was found that the percentage of illiterate women at the age of 30 and above was 80 percent.¹⁴ This is also a result of Israel's unwillingness to establish necessary educational institutions in the unrecognized villages. As part of its policy of

⁷ See supra note 1, p.8 table 6.

⁸ Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, 2018. *Perspectives of on Arab-Bedouin Women Employment in the Negev/Naqab (International Women's Day, March 2018)* <https://tinyurl.com/yd4swmv9>

⁹ Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics 2015. *Manpower surveys for 2008-2015*, tables 1.22-8.1.

¹⁰ See supra note 8.

¹¹ Kol Zchut, 2018. Minimum wage <https://tinyurl.com/ybnkifhz> [Hebrew].

¹² See supra note 5.

¹³ Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2013. *The Construction of Inequality of Arab-Bedouin Women in the labor market*. In R. Pedhazur (ed). *The Bedouins in the Negev: a Strategic Challenge for Israel*, pp. 18-27.

¹⁴ See supra note 13.



dispossession, Israel is trying to forcefully relocate Bedouins into the recognized villages and townships, so it can allocate their land according to its own aspirations.¹⁵

The main obstacles for the Bedouin education system are high dropout rates, low matriculation achievements, poor infrastructure, and a severe shortage of about 1,200 classrooms. The proportion of 17-year-olds who do not attend one of the Bedouin educational frameworks, stood at 29.3% in 2016. The Ministry of Education recognizes the severe shortage of classrooms, as well as kindergartens. However, the number of classrooms built by the ministry each year provides only 20% to 60% of the needs of the population.¹⁶

It should be noted that the political history of the Bedouin in the Negev constitutes another explanation of the gaps in education, since between the years 1948-1966, the Bedouin were forced into confinement under military rule, which prevented the Bedouin population in the Negev from accessing education and employment, among other things. Thus, the process of acquiring education was made possible only more than 20 years after the establishment of the State of Israel. The gaps in historical education are a major factor in explaining the low current employment rates of Arab-Bedouin women in the Negev.¹⁷

Early childhood frameworks: Another barrier to the integration of women into the employment market is the severe shortage of frameworks for children and toddlers. The education system in the Bedouin communities is poor, as are the frameworks for preschoolers. In 2015, only six day-care centers were operated by the government in all the Bedouin communities in the Negev, with only 384 children.¹⁸ According to data received from Sikkuy, in the school year 2015/2016, around 4,843 Bedouin children were not registered in kindergartens – about 20.8% of all Bedouin children in preschool age. The State of Israel does not fulfill its obligation to its Bedouin citizens in constructing

kindergartens for children ages 3-6. Only one-fifth of the Arab-Bedouin children at this age group are enrolled in kindergartens,¹⁹ which causes many mothers to give up their search for work, because even if they wish to be employed, they are unable to do so and must remain at home and care for the children.

Public transportation: Until 2009, public transportation did not operate in any of the Bedouin communities in the Negev, and even today it is still insufficient. The lack of public transport affect women, as they are the main users of public lines, especially among the Arab society where there is a minority of driver's license holders. While in the planned-townships the urban public transport situation improved somewhat, in the recognized and unrecognized villages, where about half of the Bedouin population in the Negev lives, no real response was given to the needs of the population. In most of the villages, the buses stop at the main roads, requiring residents to walk significant distances until they reach the station and even risk their lives by crossing highways. The lack of infrastructure of paved roads that are adapted to public transport prevents buses from entering the villages, and sometimes even to certain roads within the townships.²⁰

If we consider that in the Bedouin communities, where the percentage of owners of vehicles is low and the state of public transportation is poor, we receive another barrier that reduces the possibilities for women to access the employment market.

Employment centers and industrial zones: Another significant barrier to the integration of Arab-Bedouin women in the Negev is the low supply of jobs within the Bedouin communities. The Bedouin towns were established without adequate employment infrastructure, such as commercial zones or adjoining industrial zones, thus making most of the Bedouin population dependent on sources of employment outside their area of residence. In

¹⁵ See supra note 13.

¹⁶ Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017. *Class Identity in the Making: Professional Palestinian Women in the Negev/Naqab*.

¹⁷ See supra note 16.

¹⁸ Hagit Sofer-Forman, Yonatan Eyal, Suzan Hasan Dahar and Moria Frankel, 2016. *The plan for the promotion of growth and economic development of the Bedouin population in the south (Government resolution 3708): first report*. Myers- JDC-Brookdale Center, page 135, table 4a.

¹⁹ Eti Weissblai, 2017. *The Bedouin Education in the Negev/Naqab – State of Affairs*. Knesset Research and Data Center.

²⁰ Hagit Sofer-Forman, Yonatan Eyal, Suzan Hasan Dahar and Moria Frankel, 2016. *The plan for the promotion of growth and economic development of the Bedouin population in the south (Government resolution 3708): first report*. Myers- JDC-Brookdale Center, page 135, table 4a.



2014, 73% of Arab-Bedouin women in the Negev were employed outside of their areas of residence, compared with 50% of the Jewish women in the Negev who were employed outside their areas of residence. This shortage of workplaces within the Bedouin communities, combined with poor public transportation and a lack of educational frameworks for children, prevent women from leaving their communities when seeking employment. These are among the various causes of low employment rates among Arab-Bedouin women in the Negev.²¹

The data indicates that many Arab-Bedouin women work outside of their communities and therefore, it is fair to assume that if conditions would improve, more women would join the labor force.

The Five-Year Plans as a governmental solution – Indeed?

In the past decade, economic and strategic factors have led to a change in government policy regarding socio-economic development in the Arab population in Israel. The government detected a special need to assist Arab-Bedouin women who have not been participating in the employment market. The change in policy was reflected in the Five-Year Plan for socio-economic development between 2012 and 2016;²² the New Five-Year Plan (2017-2021),²³ and in Resolution 922,²⁴ which is intended to address economic development in the general Arab society. However, it seems that to date, these plans provide a partial response. Moreover, the goals set in these governmental resolutions are unclear so that it is impossible to know whether they meet the needs of the population. It should be noted that all of these “solutions” intentionally ignore the Bedouin population living in the unrecognized villages.

The overall decisions of the government and the resulting programs to raise employment rates in the Arab society, have not yet produced the desired results among Arab-Bedouin women living in the Negev. Today, some programs

give women a certain preference. However, for there to be a significant rise in the rate of employment, it is necessary to tailor specific programs for Arab-Bedouin women and to establish an employment support system that will work to ease the barriers women are currently encountering. In addition, although the government’s decision for a New Five-Year Plan explicitly states that women will be properly represented in the public committee to monitor the program, the Bedouin society representatives are usually men from the community and at a small number. In this case, women’s needs are pushed aside. The blatant and deliberate disregard of the Israeli government from the residents of the unrecognized Bedouin villages makes the enormous investment in the New Five-Year Plan seem not easily understood.

The land ownership issue has been repeated time and time again in every report and research done on the Bedouin population in the Negev, and for good reason. The state’s constant refusal to find a suitable solution in cooperation with the Bedouin population on this issue is an impediment to any development of the population and in all areas of life – employment, education, health, housing, etc. In the unrecognized villages, there is almost no infrastructure and no government services. This is a deliberate policy, aiming to put pressure on the residents of the unrecognized villages to relinquish their land ownership claims and transfer them to dense urban areas.

²¹ Myers-JDC-Brookdale, 2015. “Arabs and Bedouins in the Negev” column – Myers-JDC-Brookdale, Government Resolution 3708: First Report, Table 32, “Jews” and “Non-Jews” Columns – CBS, Labor Force Survey 2015, Table 2.43.

²² The Five-Year Plan (2012-2016) was part of a broader plan designed, inter alia, to resolve the land dispute between the Bedouin and the State.

²³ Government Resolution No. 2397 of 12.02.2017. *Program for socio-economic development among the Bedouin population in the Negev, 2017-2021.*

²⁴ Government Resolution No. 922 of 29.12.2015. *Government Activities for Economic Development in Minority Populations in the Years 2016-2020.*



منتدى التعايش السلمي في النقب من أجل المساواة المدنية
פורום דו קיום בנגב לשוויון אזרחי
Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality

The employment solutions cannot be uniform for all Arab-Bedouin women in the Negev. The state must recognize the differences between the constraints and circumstances in which Bedouin women operate, whether it is in the governmental townships, recognized villages, or unrecognized villages. The government has the responsibility to dismantle the barriers preventing women from accessing the employment world, and especially to invest in the education system in all the Bedouin communities, and to provide genuine and equal opportunities for the younger generation.

The State of Israel must stop its destructive policy of house demolitions and act to allocate land resources and equitable economic resources among the various communities living in the Negev, Arab and Jewish alike. The flow of budgets is limited and might not achieve the necessary results without an agreed-upon solution to land ownership issues. Only a solution based on public participation and recognition of the society's aspirations, desires and way of life will lead to the equal and just organization of the civil space in a manner that respects and enables a dignified life for all its residents, Arabs and Jews alike.



Photo: Riḍa (Kifāḥ) Abu al-Qi'ān, Umm al-Ḥīrān

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