The Grammar of Rights in Colonial Contexts: The Case of Palestinian Women in Israel

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Abstract

This article examines the limitations of human rights activism in a colonial context by invoking the voices, experiences, and insights of Bedouin women living in Israel. Through extensive interviews, Bedouin women living in unrecognized villages in the Naqab/Negev reveal their struggles as unrecognized and “invisible” members of society. The article explores the ways in which the prevailing “grammar of rights”—the formal and informal mechanisms constructed and maintained by the colonial power to accord or withhold rights—delimits and confines the lives of the women, and also human rights activism. The women’s personal stories are juxtaposed against the legal justifications used to regulate and discriminate against them, as members of the indigenous Palestinian community, within the context of a “fear industry”. The article explores, from the perspective of the interviewed women, the internalization of that culture of fear, where they are constructed as the ones to be feared, and its personal, familial, and communal implications.

The interviewed women offer a critique of the existing human right framework, and question whether a human rights activism operating in a colonial context can be an emancipating force, so long as it is constrained by the regime’s rules. Furthermore, their voices assert that acknowledging historical injustice and its effect on women’s rights is central to re-thinking feminist human rights activism. The article ends by returning to the voices of women living in the unrecognized villages of the Naqab/Negev to investigate whether, and how, feminist politics and human rights activism could operationally function together within the context of Israeli state law. The article concludes that, in order to create a “grammar of rights” that is based on equality, respect, and dignity, and which challenges the balance of power in colonial contexts, it is essential to fully include the lived experiences and insights of “invisible” and unrecognized women.
Introduction

I wish my daughter could graduate from the university. She is a very good student, but we are very poor, and we live in such a faraway area, and in an unrecognized village. When I was her age, I had asthma and was ashamed to go to school, fearing that everybody would notice my medical problem. I had serious difficulty breathing ... You know, in our area, we did not have any medical assistance, and no electricity to use the nebulizer ... and having asthma, with no medical assistance, no electricity, no buses, no help, no nearby school—all affected my entire life. I am a Bedouin woman; no one is interested in helping us ... They are interested in taking our land ... [They are] not offering medical help for us [or] good schools [or] water [or] electricity or nearby buses. For us to be treated like all the other citizens in the state of Israel is not important to Israel. Many organizations come to help us... They are human rights organizations, and they are interested in women to show the world they helped poor women. They want to help us, but their hands are tied. Israel won't allow them.

Wardah, 36-year-old Bedouin woman

Ana abed ma'amour [Arabic: I am a slave who only takes orders]: this is what all Jewish helpers, welfare workers, and human rights activists tell us when we ask them to intervene to stop the demolitions of our homes, to stop our displacement. They come with foreigners, they show them they are trying to help, they introduce them to us ... as if we are Furjeh [a display or exhibit]. I am a mother of nine children. I just had a baby girl. They did not even listen to me when I told them I just had a baby and begged them to keep my house for me, at least until I get stronger. The Jewish guy from the human rights group showed me to all his foreign friends, then used the same phrase they all use: “I am a slave who only takes orders.”

Maha, 31 year-old Bedouin woman, from an unrecognized village demolished by the state in 2008

They [the Israeli authorities] came with an army, an army of soldiers, police officers, and many others. They looked so scary. They did not come to demolish my family's house, they came to fight with an army. They did not ask whether I have children, whether I have a husband, whether I am pregnant; they demolished the entire area, left me, a single mother, powerless. They said, go get help ... I do not see anyone who could prevent the government from attacking a single mother, I don’t see, and I never saw anyone ... We are all alone here... I am all alone ... Hassi rah yteer 3a'ali [I feel I am losing my sanity].

Hiyam, Bedouin woman from an unrecognized village; the state demolished her home in 2008

Wardah's statement quoted above referring to human rights organizations operating among Bedouin communities in the Negev/Naqab depicts them as well-intentioned but with “their hands tied,” thereby questioning their ability to bring about serious transformation in Palestinian women’s lives in Israel. This questioning of human rights activism in the Naqab area was also raised by a young Bedouin woman Sara, who urged me to politicize and historicize the work of human rights organizations. In this article, I wish to take the voices of Sara, Wardah, Maha, and Hiyam as a point of departure to a larger interrogation of human rights projects operating in colonial contexts.
By sharing Sara, Maha’s, Hiyam’s, and Wardah’s voices, as well as the voices of other similarly situated women, this article considers the advantages and limitations of using human rights activism to struggle against the myriad gendered effects within the colonial context as propagated by Zionist ideology. While human rights and feminist-sensitive activism might offer starting points for challenging Israeli colonialism, I argue that they are not sufficient to defeat it. Using a Palestinian critical feminist analytic lens, which pays specific attention to women’s ordeals and the gendered effect of the workings of power in the Palestinian context(s), my aim is to re-think the local playing-out of the human rights project. As such, I argue that if human rights activism is to be effective in the Israeli context, it must pay attention to three core aspects: 1) an awareness of women’s realities and the material spaces in which human rights activism takes place; 2) an analysis of how power operates through the construction of the divide between the public and private domains; and 3) attention to both women’s agency and victimization (especially as those concepts have been articulated by women).

My center of analysis focuses around Bedouin women’s experiences of human rights activism. Listening to Bedouin women’s ordeals allows us to comprehend why Wardah refused to speak to two activists after perceiving them as collaborating with the Israeli officials that came to her village to investigate who pays taxes and determine who “deserves” social welfare. Listening to women’s voices provides an opportunity to comprehend the effect of Israel’s attacks against their homes and homeland, as captured in Hiyam’s perception that she is alone fighting an army. With women’s voices as my starting point, it becomes more apparent how colonial violations of rights condition us to think about women’s re-produced subordination, as in Hiyam’s case. Erasing Bedouin women’s ordeals, voices, and experiences in the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of human rights limits the inquiry to the experiences of the otherwise privileged members of the group. My focus on Bedouin women’s ordeals seeks to uncover the multiple burdened claims that cannot be comprehended otherwise. I argue that Bedouin women are excluded from human rights theory and anti-racist policy because both the theory and policy are affirmed on distinctive traits and characteristics that often erase their presence, mainly because they are controlled by a hegemonic regime of power. Invoking Bedouin women’s ordeals cannot be done simply by their inclusion, for such an inclusion happens within an already established analytical and operative structure and culture. I wish to argue that embracing Bedouin women’s experience of subordination and discrimination requires challenging the entire framework that has been used to achieve women’s rights and the general human rights framework that is regulated by a colonial ideology and system.

In order to advance this argument, I frame my analysis through a concept I call the “Grammar of Rights.” The Grammar of Rights is rooted in specific histories, bureaucracies, and regulations that designate separate rights for different individuals and collectives, where the designation of rights is formulated by mutually interwoven identities.
that are raced, classed, and gendered. The Grammar of Rights is expressed in specific institutions and organizations, such as state laws, state agencies, and the family. It also involves specific power relationships, and manifests in the way people subjectively experience their daily lives in terms of what is and is not allowed; what is accessible and what is forbidden; what is attainable and what is not; and most importantly, in the inadmissibility of having a say in these mechanisms of control that restrict even the most private spheres of life. The Grammar of Rights exists also at the level of representation, being expressed in ideologies, images, symbols, and texts, including those reflected in legislation. Further, the Grammar of Rights carries structural and cultural effects that are constructed by the state, by specific social positionings (e.g., as “black Bedouin woman,” “Palestinian Christian Arab woman,” etc.) and identities that affect each other in particular locations and contexts. This Grammar of Rights forms diverse conditions for applying rights, conditions that not only constitute difference (in terms of who is included and who is excluded), but also reveal the historical interconnectedness between one’s identity and their basic right to have rights.

My definition of the “Grammar of Rights” refers to the manner in which the available language/activism of human rights is constrained (literally regulated, as grammar regulates that which is possible in any language) by the legacies and contemporary realities of both formal and informal colonial regulatory regimes. These regimes—together with concomitant interpretations and assumptions—constitute and delimit the space in which advocacy and ideology concerning rights is formulated in the Palestinian context. By constraining the mode, space, place, and time in which rights may be articulated and in shaping, authorizing, and impeding the conditions of advocacy for rights, the very regime that denies Palestinians rights also imposes on and limits the options available for resistance against these conditions.

Exploring human rights activism in Israel through the prism of the Grammar of Rights, I divide my analysis into four components, each of which has its own section. The first section frames the Israeli colonial context and considers the implications of this on human rights struggles. Using the example of Al Araqib, a Bedouin village in the Naqab/Negev which has been demolished by the Israeli authorities over 30 times since July 2010, I consider whether human rights activism can ever be effective if it does not directly challenge inherent forms of racism and discrimination that inscribe and circumscribe the settler colonial nation-state itself. The second section looks more specifically at the legal justifications used to regulate and discriminate against the indigenous Palestinian minority in Israel. Here, I also consider how this spatialized system of discrimination interjects into the lives of Palestinian women. In the third section, I explore the strategies used by Israeli legislators and state agencies to target Palestinians as part of the “industry of fear” which is masked by a discourse of “security,” and thus legitimizes the lack of rights accorded to the Palestinian minority. I also consider the ways in which this politics of fear defines and shapes the lives of Palestinians citizens of Israel, especially women and girls. In the fourth
section, I return to the voices of women living in the unrecognized villages of the Negev/Naqab to investigate whether, and how, feminist politics and human rights activism could operationally function together within the Israeli state context.

**Colonialism and Its Constructs**

This article presents a view of human rights activism that refuses to situate such praxis and norms beyond politics, political structures, and political ideology. It refuses to turn human rights activism into an abstract and apolitical intervention, for doing so obscures the political character of its activism. Understanding the politics of human rights activism in Israel requires understanding the politics of law that was constructed to serve the Jewish colonial state (Hajjar 2001; Kretzmer 1992). It is important to begin by acknowledging that the Israeli nation-state is one that is embedded in a history of colonialism. Oren Yiftachel (2008) defines colonialism as “a systematic collective project of seizing and expanding control over contested lands, people, resources and power.” Yiftachel (2003) deems Israel a “pure settlement colonial society,” which he defines as one in which the colonizers attempt to “recreate a European white society in the new geographical setting, a process that often entailed a systematic dispossession and exclusion of indigenous groups.” This type of settler colonialism involves a number of tactics, including the manipulation of identities and the fomenting of internal divisions. The Israeli state has aggressively used such tactics on the Bedouin population in order to further dispossess this population of its indigeneity. While emphasizing the Bedouins’ “Israeliness,” the state has attempted to de-Arabize and de-Palestinianize them. They are portrayed as an exotic people belonging to the desert without any loyalty to the larger Arab world or any credible historical relationship to their land (Yiftachel 2008; Yonah, Abu-Saad & Kaplan, 2004).

Central to the type of settler colonialism which lies at the heart of the Israeli state is the control of space. Razack (2010) focuses on the spatiality of the colonial experience and contends that it is a distinct characteristic of the three main features of settler colonialism: the making of the colonizer as modern and the colonized as pre-modern; the eviction of the colonized from the law and from civilized space altogether; and the violence present in the colonial encounter. Razack observes that spatial segregation is produced and authorized by the law, as such colonized people are reduced to a diminished state of existence and violently evicted from settler space, evictions which function as a fundamental identity-making process for the colonizer. In this regard, settler society is marked by “internal colonialism,” which in Israel is evident in rhetoric on the Naqab: “conquering the wasteland,” “making the desert bloom” and “Judaizing the periphery.” Such mottos deny or negate the existence of the Naqab Bedouin population who inhabited the land before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Certainly, these mottos were writ large in the September, 11th, 2011 announcement of the Prawer report, which plans to forcibly re-
locate 30,000 Bedouins currently living in so-called “unrecognized” villages in the Negev/Naqab desert into government-planned townships. While officially justified under the premise of better integrating Bedouins into Israeli society, the fact that Bedouin citizens are to be forcibly relocated and urbanized while Jewish citizens are encouraged to settle the Negev indicates a deeper dynamic of indigenous negation at play (see Kestlerd’Amours, 2011a).

Colonial contexts have strong implications for the realization of human rights and human rights activism for marginalized and discriminated-against communities. Indeed, subjugated people’s suspicions of human rights value and activism, when these rights are ostensibly offered by the colonizing powers, must be viewed as part of the legacy of colonialism (Harris-Short 2003: 174-5). In her article “Righting Wrongs,” Spivak argues “human rights culture’ runs on unremitting Northern-ideological pressure, even when it is from the South ... there is a real epistemic discontinuity between the Southern human rights advocates and those whom they protect” (Spivak 2004, 527). It is not only such epistemic discontinuity that this article hopes to reveal, but also its grammar and performativity as portrayed by Bedouin women’s eyes and words. Certainly, the human rights project that is offered in colonial contexts is possessed of a colonial past and is regulated by colonial rules that promote the advancement of economic and political interests through coercive means. Thus, when human rights activists, inevitably working under the dynamics of a colonial legacy, claim to “save” individual Indian or Muslim or Palestinian women from their own husbands or fathers, such acts of rescue exacerbate the existing tensions and anxieties within these societies—particularly as the women are often caught “between and betwixt” forces that are more often than not presented as conflicting forces of “culture,” or as “primitive” and/or “non-modern” entities. Furthermore, the fact that human rights activists are regulated and must maneuver within a context of colonial legal codes can and often does lead to their being co-opted by those whom they claim to challenge. This furthers the colonizer’s insistence that such communities are ”primitive,” “backward,” underdeveloped, and, most of all, frightening and untrustworthy (Abu Lughod 2002; Razack 2008).

The currency of this strategy of colonial control is that it ensures its repeatability in re-constructing historical and discursive conjunctures, informs its strategies of marginalization, and produces “truths” and stereotypes that are “logically” and “legally” constructed. As Inderpal Grewal (1998, 507) has pointed out, although conceptually speaking human rights are Eurocentric in origin, they represent some of the tools available, however limited, in the struggle for the rights of the disenfranchised. In this regard, colonized peoples are caught in a double-bind: while they risk being co-opted by the system they wish to challenge, they nevertheless must often risk this co-option in their struggles for survival, resistance, and rights.

These types of dynamics are especially important to negotiate in a context like the Israeli one where, at times, human rights activism has been race-, class-, and gender-blind.
When being so, this activism has actually strengthened the very oppressive powers of the state it sought to challenge. In Israel, the structures of the state are inherently discriminatory, functioning as they do to promote Jewish dominance at the expense of the indigenous Palestinian population (Rouhana 1998, 2008; Zureik, 1978). Such discriminatory laws are apparent in power disparities between the native minority and the Jewish majority, disparities that include the ability to influence legislation, economic development, and land planning and use (Kimmerling 1983). Human rights activism in Israel—as in most countries—is guided and mobilized by law. Thus, the politics of human rights activism in Israel as reflected in its activities—such as monitoring, reporting, documenting, advocacy, or litigation—requires strategic use of legalism to confront and resist violations of human rights.

The profound dilemma facing human rights activism is that, while it is organized around challenging existing systems of oppression, it must at the same time abide by the rules and codes of conduct of the colonial system. Hence, in order for human rights activists to, for example, plan a demonstration or organize an activity, they must make sure that their acts are legally acceptable. In this way they contribute to a specific grammar of rights which, in some instances, may create serious ethical dilemmas for activists and jeopardize the rights of the colonized. As Santos (2002) argues, the question herein is: How can human rights activists simultaneously function as both sociopolitical regulators and sociopolitical emancipators? How can they compliantly and effectively function under a regime whose entire legal system is designed to privilege one group of citizens and diminish another, while ostensibly working towards an objective whose true fulfillment would require no less than a complete transformation of that system? Or would they, as Wardah stated, “work with their hands tied?”

The effect of such sociopolitical regulations and laws deeply influences individual beliefs concerning the ability of human rights activism to challenge structural oppression. In a recent study (Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Khsheiboun, 2009), it was found that Palestinian women whose homes were demolished by the Israeli authorities criticized the help (or lack thereof) that was made available to them by all human rights organizations on the ground—Israeli, non-Israeli, Palestinian, local, international, feminist, and non-feminist alike. Women respondents shared their frustration and disbelief at the lack of utility and effectiveness of human rights activism and explained that the activists could only manage to obtain partial remedies from the state, which usually meant a postponement of the inevitable demolition. Women further explained that what this process of postponement ultimately achieved was a reiteration of the very structures designed to discriminate against them: the heinous act of home demolitions is overlooked for a more subdued “discussion” of the “legality of the process,” while the actual act of homes being peremptorily demolished for no legitimate reason remains unchallenged.

In a similar study of Palestinian youth facing an illegally built Separation Wall (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006), it was found that women lost faith in the power of
international laws to prevent egregious Israeli violations of Palestinian rights. Women in both studies explained that they had opened their homes to and shared their own and their families’ sufferings with activists in the hope that the activists could comprehend the effect of such violations on women and their families’ bodily safety and psychological well-being. Yet, despite the personal encounters, the respondents whose homes had been demolished felt that the human rights activists who had come into their homes were unable to comprehend and empathize with individual suffering and victimization, seeing only the broader political-legal issues that encompassed their tragedies.

The case of Al Araqib stands as an important example of the grammar of human rights activism in Israel, especially as it is entrenched in the dynamics of settler colonialism. As one of the many unrecognized villages in the Negev/Naqab desert, Al Araqib and its Bedouin residents have been the targets of a concerted project of erasure initiated by the Israeli colonial apparatus. After decades of forced relocation and displacement, Bedouin families from the Al Araqib village returned to their historic lands in 1998 in order to fight the Israeli state for recognition of their rights to the land and their village (Adalah, 2011). This return followed an unsuccessful effort by families from Al Araqib to legally claim their lands in the 1970s, when legal avenues to apply for land registration became available to Israeli citizens (Adalah 2011). Currently, Bedouin residents’ claims to Al Araqib and its land are threatened by a plan initiated by the Jewish National Fund (JNF) to plant forests in the area; a project widely acknowledged as propelled by the state’s agenda to Judaize the Naqab by crowding the Bedouin community into poorly planned urban towns (Adalah, 2011). As is the case in other unrecognized villages, Bedouin in Al Araqib live under the constant threat of demolition of houses and other structures, as well as the uprooting of olive trees and other plants used for agriculture and livelihood. Further, due to their “unrecognized” status, villages like Al Araqib are denied basic services such as electricity and water (Adalah 2011; Kestler-D’Amours, 2011b).

The abundant number of times the village has been demolished—more than 28 at present—has meant that the case of Al Araqib has garnered a significant amount of attention from human rights activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alike. Indeed, in terms of the latter, there are at present numerous NGOs struggling against home demolition orders given to the village, as well as working to advocate for state recognition of Bedouin land rights. Many of these organizations are extremely active—since the beginning of 2011, for instance, the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF) has coordinated “solidarity visits” to unrecognized villages, organized discussions at local universities (such as “Human Rights in the Negev–Al Araqib as a Test Case” at Ben Gurion University), participated in demonstrations, protests, and the Human Rights March in Tel Aviv, published reports on house demolitions, and met with ambassadors and international organizations such as Rabbis for Human Rights. Despite this high level of activity, however, the work of organizations such as NCF has largely been a tedious and fruitless process in terms of outcomes for Al Araqib and its residents.
In the midst of the NCF and other NGOs’ activism, Al Araqib continually suffers from demolitions of homes and other community structures. Somewhat ironically, in “the months of February and March [the] NCF conducted tours of Al Araqib for members of the JNF council in order to highlight the affect of their activities on the community” (Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, May 2011). As these tours and other “human rights” activities were taking place and as human rights activism in the area intensified, Al Araqib was demolished repeatedly. More cynically, we are increasingly witnessing in Al Araqib a state of affairs in which NGOs and human rights activists are receiving recognition for their work while failing to achieve any substantial recognition for the village and its inhabitants themselves. In early February 2011, for example, the NCF was awarded the Emil Grinzweig Prize for Human Rights by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) for its activism; a week later, Al Araqib was demolished for the sixteenth time (Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, May 2011). Such occurrences raise the spectre of what happens to human rights activism in colonial contexts, and provoke questions of how existing unequal societal relations of power leave their mark on struggles for human rights.

Most worrying, however, is that such NGOs and activists primarily work within a grammar of rights that is oriented around legal struggles within the Israeli system. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the Israeli legal system is notoriously biased in favor of Jewish Israeli citizens and very rarely enforces the rights to which non-Jewish citizens are entitled. This is particularly true when it comes to issues of land rights for the indigenous Bedouin population. As Yiftachel observes, Bedouin “who became Israeli citizens have since submitted 3,200 legal claims to their expropriated lands, based on traditional Ottoman or British records that attest to their past holdings. To date, however, not even one Arab claimant has been awarded full ownership rights” (Yiftachel 2003, 33). Secondly, even when the Israeli legal system does make decisions which could potentially advance the rights of Arab citizens, these are very often disregarded on the ground:

The villagers [of Al Araqib] are also using other legal channels to halt the aggressive government campaign of demolitions. Following the 9th demolition on 16 January 2011, the villagers sought and obtained an injunction against the JNF to halt its planting work in the village. On 20 January 2011, however, the judge denied an appeal to extend the injunction but recommended that the JNF not undertake further work until a final resolution was reached. Despite the recommendation, the JNF has resumed its work and the attacks on villagers have increased in both number and brutality (Adalah 2011).

The fact that the JNF is able to continue working despite court injunctions to the contrary ought to make human rights activists and NGOs skeptical (to say the very least) of the efficacy of engaging the Israeli courts in such struggles.

In Al Araqib, then, we find a situation where human rights activism has had a negligible effect on promoting and securing the rights of the local Bedouin population. As an unrecognized village, legally the village and its inhabitants do not exist. The efficacy of
human rights struggles which work within this unjust legal context is thus compromised. Certainly, this issue of unrecognizability and its consequences for human rights activism is something which is raised again and again by Bedouin women living in the Negev/Naqab desert. Nawal, a Bedouin woman from an unrecognized village, articulates this well: “They [human rights activists] took me with them to speak to a group of officials. They wanted me to tell them my story. I stood there like a Furjeh [a display, a portrait], and they started asking about the way I am treated in my community, and whether my father respects me, or whether I chose to marry my husband. They come to work with us and to make us aware of our rights! How could one work on awareness of rights when there are no rights? Why [do they think] they can raise my awareness, when they do not listen to what I wanted to tell them ... that I have no right to my home, to my land, to my safety. I have no rights.” Nawal’s voice demonstrates her invisibility within the prevailing Orientalist framework of analysis that perceives Bedouin women in a culturalized manner and examines them through a system that marks them as those who have no right to basic rights. Masking severe violations of the rights to home, land and security, the Orientalized and culturalized ideology that wishes to “save the Bedouin women from the Bedouin man” increases women’s suffering. Moreover, it masks the real problem of unrecognizability, and hides the intrinsically discriminatory and racist fact that the state has allowed for many of its citizens to be classified as “unrecognized”.

Césaire (1972) and Fanon (2004), among others, have explained that we cannot analyze colonialism and its constructs without understanding the psychology of colonialism, its subtle effects on the colonized, and the systems of oppression created to configure the colonized as uncivilized. When describing the machinery and strategies of colonization, both thinkers explore how the colonial structure creates and instills fear in both the colonizer and the colonized, further legitimating the actions of the former and rendering the latter unable to defend themselves. Thus, the question persists: How can feminist human rights projects be guided by an awareness of the power relations that shape the remedies proposed by those projects, and possibly transcend them? And can they preserve human rights work as a means for opposing, rather than facilitating or legitimizing, colonial domination, as Spivak (1998, 2004) has argued?

The Politics of Fear and Palestinian Communities in Israel

In a settler colonial society, the colonized indigenous minority presents an inherent and constant challenge to the legitimacy of the state, and so is typically portrayed as a threat to be controlled and confined. Palestinians inside Israel are no exception, and the context of continual and overt conflict has created a situation in which their collective memory of dispossession and colonization is depicted as a “threat” to the state. Indeed, like Israeli land laws which seek to segregate and confine Palestinians to increasingly smaller spaces, the
memory Palestinians want to preserve and honor in relation to their space is also subject to a larger set of political and juridical moves. A law recently proposed by the right-wing coalition government, which came to power in Israel in February 2009, would ban the commemoration of the *Nakba*. The fact that this law was seen as necessary and legitimate suggests the mere mention of Palestinian history and its connection to the political present threatens the state so much that it finds it necessary to criminalize the commemoration of collective memory.

Although Israel has long denied that it perpetrated violations and massacres during the *Nakba*, the newly proposed law takes this effort much further by openly repressing even the commemoration of such atrocities. What remains as a result of this attempt to outlaw the recalling of history can be described as a manifestation of institutionalized fear that is embedded in the state’s ideology and reflected in, among other things, the laws and regulations that deny Palestinians their rights. This fear is rooted in the colonizer’s understanding that the state came into being through depriving others of their property and through physically forcing them off the land.

From the vantage point of Palestinians, the historical injustice of the *Nakba* and the subsequent determination to prohibit its commemoration have been buried under a culture of militarization and ethnocentrism, a “security theology” in which the Palestinian is cast as an “enemy” and a potent “threat” against which the colonizer must respond defensively (Abu-Saad, 2006; Yiftachel 2006). Despite the state’s claims that these juridical impositions—premised on fear—are designed to curtail the threat of Palestinian acts of violence, the real threat is that the Palestinian presence might result in the development of what Kimmerling calls “an alternative center to state power” (Kimmerling 1989). The very presence of Palestinians has the capacity to challenge the ideological underpinnings of Israel as a Jewish state. Moreover, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 enhanced and continues to reproduce this fear and the role reversal it is cast into, bringing its dynamic into sharp relief as, in one historical moment, there were twice as many Palestinians under the state’s control.

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1 As such, a constant “fear” is present in the mind of both the colonizer and the colonized. The colonized experience fear stemming from the state’s discriminatory politics, the day-to-day violations of their rights and the constant uncertainty, displacement, and loss, while the colonizers fear facing the consequences of their own ideological underpinning. Denying the existence of Palestinians and attempting to avoid an exposure of historical injustices underpins an “industry of fear” which, in turn, fuels continuous atrocities against Palestinians. The colonial state produces and re-produces a “discourse of fear” that constructs the Palestinian “citizen” of the state as a threat to Israel’s very foundation. This industry inverts the location of oppressor and oppressed, effecting an actual reversal in the political dimension that frames their relationship: The victim (the Palestinian) is erected as a potent and malevolent enemy; the off ender (Israel) is represented as an innocent victim who is denied the basic right to live on their land.

2 The state’s attitudes towards Palestinians in Israel are indicative. Data from the Rikaz 2004 Socioeconomic Survey were analyzed by independent researchers such as Abu-Bader and Gottlieb (2008). These data reveal that many Palestinian communities in Israel lack access to basic public infrastructure and equitable educational services and are characterized by low labor force participation (Abu Bader and Gottlieb 2008). In
As the constituency that is least educated, lowest-paid, poorest, most unemployed, and the least represented in leadership and decision-making positions, Palestinian women are among the weakest segments of Israeli society. Almost every report on women’s status and rights highlights one phenomenon: women’s unusually low formal labor force participation (Semyonov, Lewin-Epstein, and Brahm 1999; Swirski 2000; Yonay and Kraus 2008). In 2008, only 21% of Palestinian females aged 15 and above were employed compared to 57% of their Jewish counterparts and 62% of Palestinian males (Central Bureau of Statistics 2009). A recent research report (Awad 2007) shows that while 10.1% of Israeli woman are unemployed, the unemployment rate for Palestinian women in Israel is 19.1%. Moreover, a 2005 report by Women Against Violence found that 7.1% of Palestinian women in Israel hold BA degrees compared with 19% of Jewish women.

Educational deprivation, economic discrimination, and gender inequality is exacerbated for internally displaced women (i.e., those whose homes have been destroyed by the Israeli authorities) (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005) and for women living in unrecognized villages (Abu-Medeghem 2005). Thus, Palestinian women are vulnerable politically, legally, socially, economically, and culturally (Kraus 2002; Awad 2007; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2007).

Palestinian Bedouin women, in particular, fare poorly in the overall Israeli context, something that is especially clear when we examine the status of Bedouin women in the Negev/Naqab in contrast with Israeli women. While 51.1% of women in Israel participate in the labor market, only 10% of Bedouin women do so. While the state claims this is the result of “cultural difference,” we can see that this figure is extraordinarily low when compared to that for all Palestinian women within Israel, and even without counting women working in the informal sector. Likewise, while 43.5% of all women in Israel had nine to twelve years of schooling, 41.1% of Bedouin women in the Naqab/Negev had only zero to four years of schooling. According to statistics issued by the Galilee Society, illiteracy rates are far higher among Bedouin women in the Negev/Naqab than they are among women in Israel, with “13.2% among the 35- to 39-year-old age group; 31.7% among the 40- to 44-year-old age group; 61.4% among the 45- to 49-year-old age group; 53.5% among the 50 to 59 year-old age group; and 92.3% among the 60 + age group” (Adalah 2009). Bedouin women thus constitute arguably the most vulnerable group in Israel, and such vulnerability is only heightened by the systemic failure to include women’s voices, experiences, or knowledge in the body of knowledge produced regarding women’s economic development in Israel.

The invisibility of women’s realities and voices fuels the
discourse of fear produced and encouraged by the Israeli state. Tellingly, the issue of how to handle the Bedouin residents was taken up by Israel's National Security Council (NSC), which issued recommendations through a position paper delivered at the Herzliyyah Conference on National Security in late 2006. Instead of focusing on the entire issue of development in the Naqab/Negev, the NSC chose to focus its remarks solely on the area’s Bedouin, who make up a quarter of the local population, and on the alleged “threat” that they pose. The position paper resulted in a significant escalation of Israeli policing measures in Bedouin communities. The NSC’s resolutions recommended the establishment of an inter-ministerial board that would operate under the framework of the Israeli police and be headed by a senior police officer. The government therefore does not consider itself as representing the Bedouin, who are Israeli citizens, but rather views them as a hostile population that should be policed, surveilled, and feared, given their ostensible proclivity to engage in what is referred to as taking “illegal” possession of “state lands.” As Yiftachel puts it:

If the Bedouin-Arabs were Israeli citizens, as they are, why would their use of state land be considered an “invasion?” How do other sectors of Israeli society, such as moshavim and kibbutzim, which regularly build without planning permission, escape treatment as “invaders?” Given that the initiator of the policy is a West Bank settler (illegal according to international law), who is actually the invader here? How can a recent immigrant to the country campaign to evacuate residents who have been on the land for several generations, since well before the state was established? How can the state lease large tracts of land to non-citizen (Jewish) organizations and continue to block its own (Arab) citizens from using it for residential purposes? (Yiftachel 1999, 390)

In delegating the administration of Bedouin affairs to the NSC and Israel's police, the State infuses fear into policy areas that involve no violence or criminality, their only focus being Bedouins who are Palestinian citizens of Israel, and their way of life in general. In this way, Palestinians are marked with an aura of fear, distanced from the rest of the political community, and demarcated as a “sector” that embodies Otherness and requires unique considerations. It is not the threat of violence, but merely the Palestinian presence, that invokes fear. Every Palestinian action or demand with regard to a fair share in the distribution of national resources—from budgets to water allocation—is inevitably perceived as an act of radicalization, violence, or potential violence towards the state and its Jewish character. The Palestinian citizen of Israel is thus produced as a feared other, even when no violence is actually manifested. This production of Palestinians as feared others creates what Jamal defined as “hollow citizenship” (Jamal 2007).³

³ Aharon Barak, an academic and former Chief Justice, stated, “Treating individuals in a different manner does not always imply treating them in a discriminatory manner, and nor does treating individuals in an identical manner automatically imply treating them in an equal manner” (Barak 2009). But, as the above examples show, when citizenship and human rights are not considered universal values, a state can create and maintain a distinction between citizens based on ethno-religious origin, resulting in segregation and civic instability.
With Palestinian citizens of Israel constructed as feared others and embedded in an industry of fear promoted by the state, their voices, claims, and demands are always viewed with an element of suspicion. In this context, human rights activists often act as adjudicators, or mediators. Human rights activists get to play the role of both the Palestinians (when they represent them) and their colonizers; the regulators and the emancipators. From the vantage point of the establishment and the Jewish majority, the voices of Palestinians in Israel are not considered credible or legitimate unless they are supported or represented by human rights workers and organizations who “testify” to their ordeals. In this sense, human rights activists have in fact expropriated Palestinian voices while not necessarily challenging the larger system that silenced those voices in the first place. This “gain” is doubled when addressing women’s rights as human rights, for such activism gives activists moral authority as the defenders of the oppressed Palestinian, and in the present specific case study, Bedouin women from the Negev/Naqab. Against this backdrop, it is the Bedouin women’s voices and their appalling living conditions in the unrecognized villages that I want to consider. Attending to their voices and refusing to place their experiences only within the juridical impositions of the state adds another layer of complexity to comprehending human rights activism in colonial settings, mainly in Israel.

The Nexus between Fear and Erasure: Bedouin Women of the Negev/Naqab

In planning my first interview for my study on women and political economy in the context of Israeli policy concerning Bedouin women, I visited the house of Manar, a divorced mother who was raising her five children alone. She was the one that made me look closely at the complexities embedded in human rights work in the Naqab area. Her ambivalence about the work of human rights activism in her area was further emphasized by her daughter, and later on by all 12 women I interviewed for this paper.

Emphasizing the voices of the colonized is central to my articulation of a socially and politically engaged human rights activism and its related scholarship. This article argues that, by positing the voices of the marginalized, one can uncover the effects of the historical injustices on women’s day-to-day lives and, in turn, render human rights activism more relevant to the reality of colonized women. Acknowledging historical injustice becomes central to rethinking feminist human rights activism in conflict-ridden areas. When asserted, the marginalized voices, memory, and history of the colonized can interrupt hegemonic historical narratives and assist us in understanding the very personal traumas.

The only way that this status quo can be maintained, then, is through a politics of fear—and the projection of fearfulness onto the identity of the minoritized group.
that follow in the wake of colonialism’s power. Moreover, juxtaposing the way Israeli laws marginalize and otherize Palestinian women in a totalizing manner in contrast to women’s own voices offers us an opportunity to analyze the effects of colonialism, its process, and logic, on women and reevaluate human rights activism and intervention efforts.

When I was speaking to Manar, the woman mentioned above, her 17-year-old daughter Sara interrupted our conversation when the name of a particular human rights organization was mentioned. She spoke to me angrily and assertively:

“So, my mother’s friends from that human rights organization visit us, and help us in getting health service and our social security money. They come here, they eat here, and they bring foreigners to see our miserable situation. I know them for years, since I was a little girl, but I don’t think they know me. They do not want to understand my feelings, my bitterness, my needs ... that I need a home, not their sympathy. I need a home, and not my father in prison because he married another woman.4 I need a home, not to speak to them about my inability to reach school, or my anger towards my teachers. We need safety, stability, not a report, with our pictures looking miserable, and neglected ... I need to stop feeling afraid of everything, of life, of tomorrow ... of the future ... and not their constant visits to feel sorry for us. My mother and I are working, and are supporting ourselves financially, but this is not easy. If we were recognized, if our land was kept in our names, we won’t have suffered that much ...

I need to be able to have money to go to school, not help them finish their report ... and not work with my mother in Jewish farms, to collect tomatoes. I need the road to be paved and easy for me to reach school, not to walk for an hour under the sun, and without water fountains on the way. Who needs them? Can they return my land? Or won’t their government allow them? Can they return my water? Or they are not experts on water issues, as one of them explained to me last week. Can they stop bringing people to show us to them... then get their money (the money from foreign donors) to buy themselves cars to visit us? We do not need their visits .... Nor your visit ... This is not a zoo ... and we are not Furjeh [a display, an exhibit]. This is my home that was taken from me. Ask my grandmother, talk to her, talk to my grandfather, they will tell you we were the notables of this area, and not Shahadeen (beggars) asking for mercy.”

Sara’s voice—her expressions of disapproval, her denunciation of human rights work, her refusal to be portrayed as an exhibit (a point she repeatedly made), her insistence that I revisit the way Bedouin women are portrayed and constructed by those who seek to help them—demanded that I turn my full attention to exploring the insights and lessons of her criticism.

The present section juxtaposes the legal framework that binds human rights activism with the voices of Bedouin women who shared their stories of human rights violations “legally” perpetrated by the state. To do so, I interviewed 12 Bedouin women

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4 In Israel, polygamy is illegal. Sara’s father was imprisoned for marrying a second wife.
living in unrecognized villages in the Negev/Naqab. All 12 women gave their consent to participate in the interviews, which were conducted in their unrecognized villages between June and September 2009. The interviews were solicited through Ma'an—the Coalition for Bedouin Women. The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 37; the interviews were conducted in the homes of the women, in settings chosen by them. Family members (mainly daughters, grandmothers and in one case a neighbour) were not prevented from participating, observing, or interrupting the interviews. Three of the interviewed women were tomato pickers; three were mothers who stayed home; one was a college student; one a secretary; one was a businesswoman; one an activist; and two were school teachers.

Women interviewees explained that beginning with the inception of the state, the Bedouin residing in the Negev/Naqab saw their ancestral lands confiscated by the state for Jewish settlement. They further stressed that Bedouins were subsequently forced to relocate into an area known as the Siyag, a circumscribed region in the northeast Negev/Naqab. The military/state told the Bedouin that the move was temporary and that they would be permitted to return to their homes in a matter of months. To this day, none of those who were forced to relocate have been permitted to return. Jewish farmers now use much of this land. Over the years, the Bedouin developed permanent settlements in the area, settlements which remain “unrecognized” by the state. Some of these unrecognized villages existed before 1948.

Through an exploration of the insights accorded to me by Sara, and through the remarkable comprehensions and apprehensions of the 12 interviews, I make three interlocking points which I see as integral to a potentially emancipatory, feminist and anti-colonial approach to human rights activism in Israel. First, human rights activism must take into account the importance of historicizing present physical spaces in which such activism takes place. Second, it is critical that activists and NGOs pay attention to the ways in which power functions in and through both the public and private spheres and not fall into the trap of using women’s life and hardships as *Furjeh* [exhibit/display]. Third, a feminist approach to human rights activism must pay equal attention to women’s agency and victimization, as Sara’s voice and others asserted, rather than focusing on victimhood which further undermines women’s voices. Reading through these women’s narrations of the daily discrimination and oppression they face at the hands of the Israeli colonial state is a critical methodological approach in such a context, where Bedouin women are silenced and made invisible by the structures of power.

As part of this methodological approach that was initiated by Sara, the 17-year old Bedouin woman, my intent in this section is to critically examine human rights activism and the effects it has on the lives of the colonized as portrayed by the women themselves. My ultimate goal is to understand, through the narratives, how colonized unrecognized women struggle to reconcile their realities of racism and discrimination with the work of human rights activists in the context of the colonial state.
Historicizing Spaces of Belonging

History, of course, is always present: it continues to mark the everyday lives of people, its structures embedded in modern-day narratives and modes of belonging. For Palestinians living in Israel, the traumatic and violent appropriation of their land inherent to the construction of the Zionist state is a historical process which permeates daily existence, manifesting in all areas of life and turning day-to-day struggles into acts of anti-colonial resistance. Something which re-emerged time and again in my interviews with the Bedouin women was the ever-present presence of history—more specifically, the Nakba—in their daily struggles. It is this persistence of history in women’s lives that human rights activists and workers must engage with if they are to truly comprehend the lives of those whom they proclaim to assist.

Wardah, a Bedouin woman who works as a tomato picker on a Jewish-owned farm, speaks to the power of history in the ways it interjects into her current reality. Her story starts with her current location and takes us to her roots as an uprooted woman, her historical displacement, while reflecting on her daughter’s future. She says:

I kept on working on the farms. I am a tomato collector [picker], and to do this, I need to wake before 4:00 a.m., leave my children asleep, and go work all day long. My body is covered with insect bites. But while working, and while feeling very tired, I tell myself, “Maybe this place belonged to my family, maybe we were silenced when they stole our property, maybe we should have resisted their confiscation of our land in a more aggressive manner.” But, I also tell myself that I won’t live in the “maybes;” I will work and continue working, as hard as I can, to better the life of my family (I also always bring them tomatoes). I want my daughter to finish school, drive a car, find a job, and never need anybody... Maybe she could be an attorney and regain our rights to land ... We, the Bedouin, are the real owners of this entire land ... and look how beautiful the area is.

Wardah’s insistence on improving her and her family’s life conditions, and her commitment to her daughter’s education and economic independence, links the present state of neglect of the Bedouin community with the historically rooted power of hope; the same was true of the other 12 women who were interviewed for this paper. The women’s voices revealed that their historical perspectives about the injustices inflicted upon them by the state’s policies and laws were grounded in the influence of such laws on their physical and social safety. It should be stressed, as these women’s narratives clearly demonstrate, that it is impossible to convey the full magnitude of suffering and trauma these respondents have experienced.

The ways these women’s historical traumas shape their perceptions of the inefficacy of human rights activism in Israel must be recognized. Choosing to exclusively listen to women’s voices within the dynamics of colonial contexts allows us to shed light on the way such activism is perceived by those who suffer from the violations of their basic rights through state laws that create, reinforce, and strengthen the already structurally unequal
positions of women within their families and societies. The narrative below is from Nawal, whom we heard from earlier. Like Wardah, Nawal emphasized her embeddedness in the Palestinian history of displacement, stressing how this manifests in her everyday life and daily struggles:

We are originally from this area [in Southern Israel], but during the Nakba, my grandfather was in the resistance movement against the Zionist occupation, and in 1948, my entire family was kicked out [of the country]. My father worked in Gaza, and I was forced to marry my cousin from our village. When I came back to our village, the roads between Gaza and the Naqab were open, not like now, and since I am educated and have a diploma in education, I worked, then started a new business, learned fashion design in Shankar [an Israeli fashion school], and learned administration.

My family history, and the fact that I was born in Gaza, has affected every single step I have taken. So [for example], when I take the train to go buy fabric for my business, they stop me and body search me. When I board the bus, or go to the hospital for treatment, they harass me ... Now I have my own car, but, I still suffer ... in every single step I take, I feel persecuted... I have so many stories; it is hard to count them ... Last week, in the train station, they brought their dogs to smell me ...

Not only do they control everything in our lives—our movements are controlled by them, our work, our children's future—[but also] my appearance [she wears the veil] and my scent scares them ... and I told them that according to our Islamic beliefs, dogs should never come near us, but ... they do bring their dogs near us all the time to harass us.

When asked about the role of human rights organizations in fighting such violations, Nawal asserted:

What human rights organizations? We here in the Naqab—and I can tell you from years of working with many women who work for me in my business—we do not feel they exist. You know, so many women have sought the help of N [she names one of the human rights organizations that is very active in the Naqab], but they can't fight the Israeli system. You know, even their own lawyer was unable to help his own wife, he was unable to get her an ID ... Human rights organizations need our help, not the other way around.

Nawal’s voice shows the conflation of the self and the collective as unrecognized and surveilled by the colonizer, a dominant theme among the Bedouin women I interviewed. The fact that she lives on property that belongs to her family, that she belongs to an extended family that has lived for hundreds of years in the area—long before the state of Israel was established—these facts do not result in her recognition in the eyes of the state. Being an unrecognized woman living in an unrecognized village has profoundly affected her struggle for dignity and equality. Such lack of recognition has transformed her into an excluded, invisible entity, in the sense that she—as with many members of her community—has not even been issued an official identity number. From the perspective of the state, she literally and formally does not exist, either as a citizen or as a living being, let alone as a human being entitled to rights. In this context, it is of little wonder that Nawal questions the role of human rights organizations working in the Naqab/Negev, whose
existence—like her own—she sees as negated by the state. Furthermore, her insistence that it is the human rights organizations that need her help, and not the other way around, is indicative of her belief in their inefficacy, or even impotency, within the Israeli colonial context. Nawal concluded: “Do you understand what I am telling you? They [human rights organizations] are the ones that are in need of us, they won’t have work without us, but they look at us today ... as unrecognized, and try to help us ... could you ever help a Palestinian, a Bedouin, a woman without knowing their history? Yes, I was born in Gaza ... but, I am from the Naqab.”

Human rights activists must be careful not to ignore the history of colonialism and its traumas: not only because this history embeds itself in Bedouin women’s perceptions of human rights work, but also because a history of displacement (and its acknowledgment) is critical to understanding their current subjectivity and social positioning. The voices of Bedouin women like Nawal reveal the effect of the metabolic-like nature in which their surveilled invisibility works to camouflage their history of injustice and unrecognizability. As social subjects, their sense of being “unsafe” and “dangerous” functions like the circulation of blood in the body: these and other characteristics of their subjectivity spread throughout their entire social and existential world, speedily and efficiently “oxygenating” their systematic oppression, intensifying transgressions against them through use of their bodies, appearance, scents, time, space, and lives. Moreover, this spiral circulation of their unrecognizability is non-reciprocal; that is, it forces the unrecognized to see, feel, live, and be gradually asphyxiated by it, while leaving the recognized—including human rights activists—the choice to see their unrecognizability or to deny its existence. Access to spaces of visibility in human rights ways of seeing Bedouin women is a central political question, and demands that we must revisit the framing of human rights activism and challenge state systems of control and surveillance.

**Public Fears and Private Traumas**

Bedouin women’s stories from the Naqab represent how the state’s deliberate cultivation of “fear” toward Palestinians actively violates their rights on a daily basis, all in the name of “upgrading their living conditions” and “modernizing” these women. Salwa’s story is one such example. I met Salwa in one of the unrecognized villages two months after the demolition of her home. Her house was one of 10 that had been demolished in one day. Salwa is a young 20-year-old mother of a 12-month-old boy. Her son was 10 months old when the demolition occurred. When we spoke, her voice, body language, and actions were all telling her story and conveying her agony. We met in her new home, a place that could also be demolished soon. We sat in an empty room, the floor of which was only partially cemented. Salwa wanted to share her story, so she pulled a door-handle from the pocket of her dress, affixed the handle back to the door, and closed it. She said:
Now the door is closed, we can talk ... [She stopped for a minute.] As if we could close our doors or feel safe in our homes ... Let me tell you what happened to my life, my family, my house, my new furniture ... I live the demolition in every act I do today; I live it when I wake up and see my child, when I look at my husband's anger, when I see the faces of those who come to help us—but they never talk to women. I live it in my body [She pointed to her heart and her chest].

She began to relate to me her entire experience of facing the demolition of her home, of how she thought this would never happen to her—a story that echoes Maha’s and Hayam’s stories that were related at the beginning of this paper. Her tone of voice, her descriptions, and her body language all reflected severe loss and pain. But, while listening to her for over 35 minutes, I also heard an infant crying in the background. The baby did not stop crying. When I asked her about it, she replied:

This is the nightmare from which I can't awaken. This boy reminds me every day of the demolition. I can’t take it anymore. On the evening following the day of the demolition, we were all sitting around the fire for hours, crying, talking, thinking, “What can we do? How can we deal with the loss of the house?” I was in a state of shock. Sitting, listening to people taking, but my mind was floating; I felt I was lost in this world. All of a sudden I heard my baby's screaming and crying, and I realized he had crawled into the fire. There was no fire, but the stones and the sand were still boiling, and he burned his two hands, his palms, his fingers ... and part of his chin. We took him to the hospital, but his burns were severe. Just think about the fact that they [the Israeli authorities] demolished our homes and our neighborhood, and we then had to go to the hospital, see their faces, and get their medical help ... horrible feeling ... horrible ... We stayed in the hospital, and everyone looked at me and my husband with anger. They even called the police to interrogate me; in Israel, this is called “violence against children.” It was terrible: My child was suffering, my husband was blaming me, I lost my home, I was interrogated ... the worst day of my life. We stayed in the hospital for two weeks, and every time the doctors and nurses came to check on the baby, they looked down on me, I was the primitive Bedouin mother who had failed to protect her son from being burned ... long, long story ... One day, when the doctor came to check on my baby, he changed the bandage over the burn in such a rough manner. I felt his deep hatred towards us. I decided to take my child out of the hospital without anybody's permission, and came back to my family. Since that day, my aunt has been changing his bandage, the doctor here is helping us, but he still cries a lot. He is better, but still in pain.

Salwa’s voice shares with us the effect of Israel’s ideology-guided policy on her everyday life as a woman, young mother, and wife: the ways in which very public decisions come to affect the private lives of Palestinian women. The ordering of her world produced by the multiplicity of her losses and the workings of power that reconstructed her motherhood and her homelessness deeply affected her voice and narrative. Her unrecognizability reveals the plurality of the “spheres” and arenas of oppression. Although each sphere has its own separate logic, they are all entangled with state ideology and colonial logic when operating in specific contexts. Salwa, faced with this plurality of legitimizing oppressive rubrics, supported by institutionalized forms and rules monopolizing the everydayness of her life, reconstructed her gendered roles while creating several fluid identities—as an unrecognized woman, unfit mother and wife, unwanted Bedouin, unheard voice-holder.
With such plurality of losses and unrelenting daily aggressions, Salwa has remained, in the eyes of the state and its majority, an unrecognizable subject who “threatens” the state of Israel with her status as unwanted, unrecognized, and invisible.

Salwa’s voice—as feminist epistemologists stress—emphasizes the impossibility of separating the personal from the political. Salwa’s insights were found and supported by other women, such as Sara, who refuses to divorce her daily hardships from her history and from her status as an unrecognized woman who is unnoticed, unseen, and unheard, yet culturalized. Her voice highlights how Bedouin women’s national history and the continuity of the Nakba affect their daily lives, safety, and development. Moreover, her voice clearly challenges the conceptual boundaries between the private and the public, the personal and the political, and colonial and neo-colonial contexts. Divorcing private from public politics, which is a clear theme throughout the history of colonial control, not only allows power holders to further divide the colonized society, but also has in some cases provided a convenient alibi for further economic, military, and political oppression. Nawal’s words reflect these colonial mechanisms; when she described the oppression she experiences at the hands of the state she revealed she felt Israel defined her as, “an unrecognized person—not even human—living in an unrecognized village. We are unwanted, unrecognized, unseen, and of course, not felt.”

The subjective and personal consequences of the Israeli state’s public policy of unrecognizability are profound, as many of the women interviewees noted. Eismat, for instance, highlighted one other aspect of Israel’s exclusionary practices—their effect on women’s health. She stated:

I am 37 years old, and I am a sick woman. I have diabetes. When I was sick while young, we could not reach the clinic. It was too far. I was 16 years old, and my family did not know what to do with my condition. The men were very upset, the women were trying to find a new place and reorganize it. It was right after our area and houses were demolished, and we needed to relocate and move to another place. Today, I suffer from diabetes, which I discovered after I got married. My mother told me that it seems I got it following the loss of our homes. If I was not a woman living in this unrecognized village, don’t you think that my health would have been better? If I was a Jewish [meaning Israeli-Jewish] woman, don’t you think that I would have been living in a better place, with full access to medical service? But I am not.

Listening closely to such voices shows their awareness of how the unequal and discriminatory distribution of rights and power continues to jeopardize women’s lives, health and well-being. Bedouin women’s bodies become the field upon which government policies manifest and are enacted, their very flesh bearing the marks of public decisions and ideologies. The voices of women like Nawal, Eismat and Salwa demonstrate that human rights activism cannot simply limit itself to the “public” domain and can’t divorce the private from the public; nor can they work to transform the “private” in an ahistorical and apolitical manner. Bedouin women’s voices insisted on historicizing their
contemporary reality of colonialism while reorganizing and recreating home. They refused to divorce the private from the public; indeed, it is the so-called private sphere where public politics are embodied. The experiences of Bedouin women thus warn against the “compartmentalization” of human rights struggles—like the almost exclusively legal focus of many human rights organizations working in Al Araqib, to return to an earlier example—and emphasize the need for critical approaches which acknowledge the artificiality of distinctions between public/private and political/personal. As it is women who are traditionally relegated to the private domain, it is perhaps paradoxically through paying attention to their voices and experiences that activists and NGO workers will be best educated to comprehend the complexities of human rights struggles in colonial contexts.

Fearing the Unrecognized, Colonizing Victimhood

The deleterious effects of fear and colonial control—as apparent in, for example, Salwa’s voice above—are especially clear when we examine the connection between the state’s colonial ideology and women’s daily lives. The connection between such colonialism, as explained by the interviewees, and the “politics of fear” produces and reproduces a new technology of control over daily life, space, and status of Bedouin women and their communities.

In Israeli colonial ideology, Arab-Palestinian women are put in a very vulnerable and insecure position, and are perceived by the colonizers as in need of “rescue” from “primitive” Arab men. Israel is presented as modern, civilized and advanced, while the indigenous Palestinian population is Orientalized as either in need of control or assistance, making colonial subjects into “victims” not of colonialism, but of themselves (see for example Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2004). Alluding to this dialectic of modern/pre-modern, the women interviewees spoke of Israel’s claim to be a democracy, and its fear that Arab/Bedouins are endangering the state and its “democratic” values. They also elucidated Israel’s abuse and neglect of the Arab/Bedouins daily suffering and their communities’ continuous losses as the state takes more of their land. As Nawal explained: “They tell the world they fear us, that we are savages, they tell their people to fear us … and they have modern ways to get rid of us.”

These women discussed how Israeli bureaucrats and human rights activists claimed they came to “help them” to become more educated, more modern, and more advanced, and yet failed to stop their oppression. The intricate colonial agenda was evident in women’s voices and stories, as was apparent to Wardah, who stated: “As my mother always reiterates, they want to penetrate our communities, to know more about who knows what, and who leads who, and then grab more land from the less advantaged. They suggest that we participate for example in civil service … this is a new fashion in the last years, they even came to convince my daughter and son … you know, like military service … and when we do so, and many of us are willing to participate, because we need the money—my son
agreed, my daughter refused—we are very poor ... and the decision is not easy ... They penetrate us more, learn about us more, visit us more, eat in our houses, tell the world that women are backwards, and men are savages and women beaters, and tell the world they are helping us ... Our story with them is a long, long story.”

The lack of separation of the maneuvering techniques of human rights activists and Israeli officials meant that the Bedouin women saw them, as one stated “Al Munqeth al Kathab”, which translates to the “liar saviors.” Using the various layers of Bedouin’s vulnerability, be it the classed poverty, the raced Palestinian Bedouin, or the gendered Bedouin woman, uncovers the intricacies of offering support in such a complex context. Such intricacy was furthered when discussing the ordeals of darker-skinned Bedouin women, or those married to partners from the West Bank or Gaza, or those with weaker social networks, all of whom were more vulnerable to abuse at the hands of the Israeli police and army. Using policies, techniques, and interventions justified with claims such as “feeling sorry for,” “lifting some modes of oppressions from,” or “modernizing the otherized” were all perceived by the women as turning a blind eye to their claims. Erasing the invisibilized colonial subject with unnoticed practices negates the historical memory of uprooting and land grabbing. The falseness of the state’s claims to want to “help” and “democratize” Bedouin women was equally clear to all 12 women interviewees, regardless of their level of education or economic status.

In contrast to the colonizer’s perceived fear of being attacked by the unrecognized Bedouin community, the women’s fears come from their daily anxieties over the constant insecurity they endure and their legal status (defined and enforced by Israel) as unrecognized entities. In other words, while the Israeli state and intervening human rights organizations stress the victimization of Bedouin women at the hands of their own “culture,” it is this narrative of “self-victimization” that actually promotes and facilitates many of the traumas, insecurities and struggles they face in their everyday lives. Each of the women with whom I spoke shared with me their inability to feel safe on their own land and their need to be considered an equal subject under the law, with the legal option of claiming their rights. They indicated how the effects of the occupation of their lands and state neglect opened new spaces for patriarchal abuses. This in turn reproduced patriarchy, and further exacerbated the gender inequities manufactured and promoted by the Israeli state itself, when the state has chosen to blame the situation of women and their social status on a vague and stereotypic conception of “Palestinian culture.”

Aisha, twenty-seven years old, articulates her victimization at the hands of the Israeli state:

I am from Taweel Abu Jirwel, one of the unrecognized villages. My house was demolished many times, as was my entire village, including my parents’ house ... They fear our tents, our simple houses, our existence. Our lives are lost. One day they [the government] asked us to move temporarily, and after a couple of months, they accused us of moving without permission. Then many human rights
organizations came to help us, but nothing stopped them [the government]. We women try to keep the family together, try to protect ourselves from bad fortune. I even started working on Jewish farms to help my family financially. But, it is very hard on women, very hard—the heat, the constant movement, having children and getting pregnant under such conditions is tiring. I personally am exhausted. They are after us however we move and wherever we are. They do not care about the criticism of the various human rights organizations ... I know that as a member of the Taweel Abu Jirwel village, I will never have any rest.

Similarly, Saideh explained the way her victimization was structured by bureaucracy, and the consequences of this on her daughter:

I live in a caravan [mobile home] in a public park ... we are dying from being displaced again and again, being pursued and unsafe, and they [the government] keep telling us be’tipoul, be’tipoul [Hebrew for “in treatment”; that is, that the government is looking for ways to deal with and solve the problem]. We applied and fi led all the papers to purchase this lot, we went to the Israel Land Administration, we asked the help of the municipality, but they all said, “Now live in the caravan until we finish all the formal papers.” Now we live in the caravan knowing, as my father-in-law told us, that this land is ours; it was my husband’s grandfather’s. It is very hot here. It is very distant from the children’s school ... and I ended up marrying my daughter early. She so much wanted to continue her studies and become a secretary, but our financial situation is getting worse, and we are still illegal. This life is becoming unbearable; I hope that her husband will let her study ... such an unbearable life.

The constant threat the Bedouin face from the government, the fact that they are unrecognized entities living in caravans, and their inability to create a safe environment for themselves and for their families were all well articulated by Saideh:

Both my children and I are not healthy, and to tell you the truth, I do not know whether it is due to a congenital problem or due to our fears of needing to face uprooting again and move to a new caravan site. I have moved two times with my husband, and maybe three times with my family. I have no energy to move anywhere [she paused] ... maybe not even the energy to go the grave.

Her sister-in-law Sana’ explained:

We live a day at a time: housing demolitions, fear, so much fear, and the men are very affected, more than the women, for they feel they are unable to protect us. They are, as you know, the only breadwinners in the family, and no one can help but our families who are also facing the same destiny ... No state, what state can we rely on? We have one state—a state that demolishes our lives and our homes.

One young woman, motioning to her aunt, told me:

It is not only our education, our life choices, our marriages—it is our constant losses. My aunt is sick, and God knows what will happen to her. We are so far away from clinics and doctors, we have no mailing addresses ... ask her, ask her, she will tell you.
So the aunt stated:

When I was discharged from the hospital, they asked me for my address. I have no address, because I live in an unrecognized village. I could not give them an address to send me the results of my test, or to follow up with my cancer. When I lived in Quaider, we had clinics, but even there they did not have medicine, the computer was not working, and the doctor spoke Hebrew. I do not know Hebrew, and therefore I did not know how to use the injections or how to take my medicine.

Saideh’s daily struggles with the Israeli colonial apparatus affected her and her family’s views and perceptions of human rights work in the Negev/Naqab. Her daughter continued: “We were helped by Safa’, the head of one of the human rights organizations.” And the mother intervened: “Yes, they try to help, but our problem is very big, it is bigger than all of us ... much bigger, and I see no solution, it is like living in a prison, with no exit.” These words show that the problems Saideh faces are larger than her capacity to solve them and that the assistance of activists is required. Yet, challenging such institutionalized, legalized oppression and discrimination calls into question the ability of the human rights framework to work under and within the rules of the state.

Despite the limitations of working within the prison of inconsistent and illogical (colonial) state laws, and despite their deep frustration with the work of human rights organizations, human rights activists were viewed by most interviewees as being people who are overwhelmed by the brutalities of the state but who continue to maneuver within the limitations imposed upon them; they are seen as providing some measure of compassionate support to vulnerable members of the population, albeit according to Israeli-imposed structures (legal, human rights-based, and so on). For this reason, they are perceived as being able to diagnose problems, but the diagnosis is drawn from the colonizer’s diagnostic manual. They offer help and act to curb injustices, but turn suffering into their jobs and profession. The questions remain: Can human rights workers provide help when the tools they are using are those allowed and approved by the oppressor? And can women suffering from such violations challenge their oppressor?

Despite the limitations placed upon human rights activism in the Israeli context, it is again the voices and acts of women that may provide us with some guidance. Certainly, in spite of their victimization at the hands of the Israeli state, the Bedouin women provided me with critical insights into what gives them the strength (as opposed to power) to struggle against state oppression and discrimination. Women’s voices represent the daily struggles in facing the day-to-day obstacles erected by the colonial project. Their discussions of their economic and spatial exclusions and its gendered ramifications provoke them to look desperately for a way out of the spiral transgressions of colonialism (Memmi, 1991). The question Safa’ pondered was: How could these women attempt to fight Israel’s injustices when they are imposed daily, and carried out legally?

Safa’s method of resisting such institutionalized injustice was by first making sure to tell her children the stories she had heard from her own grandfather, who had been one of...
the tribal leaders. Safa’s hopes are that these stories of resistance and refusal to accept any kind of humiliation will instill in her children a sense of the unwritten history of their past. Her daily storytelling practices with her children allow her to not only keep them informed of their history and the spiral effect of the daily transgressions, but at the same time allow her to reassert her own history and her own fears, thereby refuting the fabricated Israeli narratives of fear, and “feared” Bedouins. She stated that she wanted to talk of the everyday, about “the Bedouin movements, villages, tents, women, even food.” She said: “I tell [my children] stories to make them be proud of their people and to teach them that we also have our own history, and ours is filled with dignity and honor. Jews are not the only people with history ...” Her creation and promotion of such narratives—which aims at sustaining resistance despite her being “unrecognized”—and her ability to develop new ideas of fighting back to weaken the metamorphosis she is imprisoned in, was apparent in her acts and voice. It is perhaps these alternative narratives that offer some space for genuine human rights activism, in that they promote and reconfigure “publicly feared” Bedouins as equally human and equally deserving of recognition and respect.

Thinking Beyond Human Rights Activism Through the Grammar of Rights

There were over 20 human rights organizations working on our case, trying to prevent our uprooting again, and there were maybe three or four women’s human rights organizations working on my sister’s divorce story, and her right to keep her son with her; and when we wanted to get an official approval to get water to our village, human rights organizations were very active ... they come, they take pictures, they talk to us, they collect documents—they actually lost my sister’s papers—but ... it is all a game ... they distract us ... they keep us busy, looking for documents, searching for proofs, contacting lawyers, going to court ...and since 1948 ... we are losing more and more ... human rights organizations do not know how to act ... it is all trials ... they try one way, if it doesn’t work, they try another way ... and when I challenge them to look for better ways they reply ‘the law doesn’t allow us’ ... so the law does not allow them to stop land confiscation, the law does not allow them to stop demolishing our houses, the law does not allow them to better our schools, or build new ones ... and maybe the law allows them to keep child’s custody with my sister ...

Maisa, 27 years old

Maisa’s reflections and extremely powerful voice reveal—as do the voices of other interviewees—that the grammar and modes of human rights interventions are trapped within colonial logic. These women’s voices speak against asserting one’s rights through the laws of the settler colonial state for their experiences as Bedouin women are much broader than the general categories that the state oriented human rights discourse provides. As Maisa explained, it all depends on activists’ ability to adhere to Israeli laws, regulations, and terminologies, thus submitting to the colonizer’s grammar of rights. This situation is similar to the feminist critique of the criminal trial, in which rape victims need
to fit their stories into the evidentiary rules, a burden which further traumatizes them and often denies them a fair hearing. Kim Scheppele argues that having one’s story disbelieved and transformed into something completely different is one of the most disempowering experiences one can have (Scheppele 1989).

Therefore, we find ourselves asking: What can be done in the case of Bedouin women, citizens of the state of Israel, who live in the unrecognized villages? How can one build a more attentive Bedouin-woman-centered human rights activism without filtering it through categorical analyses that completely erase Bedouin women’s experiences? I argue that hearing the voices of Bedouin women allows us to understand the centrality of their experience, not as women (similar to Jewish women), and not as Bedouins (similar to the Bedouin community), but rather the interlocking experience of being Bedouin women, living in a specific time of history and space. Such experiences cannot be understood without contextualizing them as incidents operating and embedded in a colonial grammar of rights. I further argue that Bedouin women's insights suggest that it is uncritical, anti-feminist and disturbing to accept the dominant ways of thinking and dealing with human rights violations without bringing Bedouin women’s ordeal to the forefront.

Listening carefully to the voices of Bedouin women suggests that a feminist-revisionist approach to human rights activism must be informed first and foremost by comprehending the complexities of the nature of human rights activism in colonial settings, and second by examining practical and judicial interventions and manipulations. Such a feminist-revisionist approach requires a complex analysis of the interlock between the regime of power and politics (state law included) on the one hand, and women’s knowledge/experiences, including the gendered, classed and raced meanings of the suffering they experience when they encounter various oppressions. Feminist-revisionist analysis of human rights activism suggests that it is only through identifying and understanding the supremacy of the privileged and the visible (in this case, the Israeli Jew) that one can comprehend the ways in which the unrecognized (e.g., Bedouin women) is rendered invisible. Such a proposed feminist revisionist approach sheds light not only on acting against, researching, and documenting invisibility (while turning invisibility into a crucial category of analysis), but also on the way the invisible Other and Otherized define the visible (the Jewish Israeli).

I argue that only by understanding such politics and the spiral dynamics of such analysis can feminists and other critical thinkers address the demands of women who live under the yoke of racism, sexism, and occupation, and so engage in true human rights activism. If the activism does not contribute to making Other(s) more understandable, more visible, and more identifiably human, activism might further their suffering if not exploit it.

In relation to the above, without a Palestinian feminist critique that engages with invisible women’s own knowledge and meanings and looks to the power games behind state rules, regulations, and oppressive legal and policy methods, the “grammar” of
colonization and dispossession will remain beyond the bounds of human rights activism and will fail to capture Bedouin women’s worlds and lives. It would also be hard to truly hear their words or to speak truth to power unless human rights activists base their analyses on these women’s experiences and on the experiences of the many other Palestinian women who are assigned to the same legally and politically defined categories of citizen versus alien.

**Gender and Israeli Law in Context**

The multiple tensions to which women are subjected, and the role and status that women occupy within their families and community, requires a broader look at human rights issues in colonial contexts (Ewelukwa 2002, 424). If we are to imagine a Palestinian feminist framework for examining human rights activism, it is imperative to look at the ways in which the grammar of rights influences and shapes the present conditions of women and the preservation of their rights to their land and a safe home and not a grammar of rights that is controlled by hegemonic, Orientalist and culturalized ideologies.

Such an analysis, I believe, should be done in the context of the Palestinian history of dispossession and displacement. While focusing on the way Israeli laws relate to the indigenous Palestinian minority inside Israel, it must be recalled that Palestinian citizens of Israel were in 1948 turned into a minority against their will as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel. Understanding their current reality therefore requires recognizing and facing the reality of their historical dispossession:

The state started as a settler-colonialist project in which settlers from outside the land—first from Europe—claimed the homeland as exclusively their own, and in a long and violent settlement project, managed to take over the land from the indigenous inhabitants. While the majority of the indigenous groups were forced to leave or left under the duress of war or fear of massacres, a segment managed to remain as a minority—a homeland minority ...Almost by definition, the settler-colonialist project requires actively and forcibly repressing the homeland minority’s identity, history, narratives, and culture, since it challenges the very legitimacy and essence of the colonizers’ national mission (Rouhana 2008, 73).

As asserted earlier, the control of space is integral to settler colonial domination, and in Israel, a significant component of this control has been enacted through land law. Following its establishment, the state of Israel began erasing the historical landmarks of the territory it now controlled through the rapid legal transformation of space (Forman and Kedar 2004, 812). Within just 12 years, Israel effectively normalized and institutionalized Palestinian dispossession and displacement through use of the law\(^5\) in order to ensure Jewish

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\(^5\) Land confiscations have been legalized primarily through two laws. The first law was the Land Acquisition (Validation of Acts and Compensations) Law, 1953, which legalized the expropriation of lands in both the...
domination. While the exact number of *dunums* lost is disputed, what is undisputed is that Palestinians displaced during the *Nakba* lost land that comprised the majority of the land they had formerly inhabited (Forman and Kedar 2004, 812). This land, appropriated by force, was deemed in the law “abandoned land” and elaborate legal “rationales” for its expropriation by the state were articulated. Within a short period of time, the state made these temporary legal frameworks permanent by enacting the “absentee system.” Tens of thousands of Palestinians not present on their property during the 1948 war but who remained in the country eventually became known as “present absentees,” an oxymoronic classification by the Israeli government reflecting its colonial logic (IDMC 2009). Finally, the state codified property once belonging to Palestinian refugees as “Israel lands” and established, in 1960, the Israel Lands Administration (ILA).

Legally, then, ownership over the land left behind by Palestinian refugees (and its corresponding spatial reconstruction as Jewish) was determined by a set of shifting legal procedures and rulings, and the creation of the ILA was the culmination of this process. Currently, the ILA manages 93% of the land (19.5 million *dunams*, or 78 million acres) held by the state of Israel and by the Jewish National Fund, a quasi-state entity (ILA 2010). The ILA works in tandem with Zionist organizations, including the JNF (currently attempting to claim the lands of Al Araqib), a non-profit organization founded in 1901 to fundraise in Jewish communities for the expansion of Jewish settlements in Palestine.

Destroyed or evacuated Arab villages as well as in the remaining Arab villages. The territorial extent of these expropriated lands is estimated at approximately 1.2 million *dunams* (1,000 square meters or 10,764 sq. ft.). In addition, much land was expropriated under the Land Ordinance (Acquisition for Public Purposes), 1943, such as the 1976 Land Day expropriations of approximately 21,000 *dunams* (Bishara and Hamdan 2009). The second law was the Absentee Property Law of 1950. Estimates of the number of *dunams* expropriated under this law ranges from 2 million to 16 million. For more information regarding the land expropriated according to the above two laws, see Adalah (2010).

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6 This is apparent in the fact that the newly created state banned many Palestinians who had temporarily left their property but remained within the state’s borders from returning to their homes.

7 See footnote 3 concerning land expropriation through the Absentee Property Law.

8 Article 4 of the Absentee Property Law of 1950 granted all Palestinian absentee property to the Custodians of Absentees Property and Article 19 of the law authorizes the Custodian to transfer the property exclusively and solely to the Development Authority. The Development Authority is authorized to use the property in a variety of ways, but the law forbids the selling of such property. However, during 2007 the Israel Lands Administration (ILA) has been publishing numerous bids for the sale of absentees’ property into private hands. For more information, see Adalah (2009b).

9 See Israel Administration Land Law of 1960. Article 2 authorized the ILA to administrate the “land of Israel.”

10 The creation of the ILA articulated a central role for the state in the land allocation process by offering leaseholds to Jewish citizens and entities interested in using and enjoying the expropriated land. There were two major elements to the codification of Israeli policy and in the transferring of land use, control, and ownership from Arab to Jewish-Israeli hands: The first involved the nationalization of public and Arab land through the establishment of the ILA. The second involved “selective allocation of possessory land rights within the Jewish population” (Kedar 2000, 4).

11 While the JNF claims non-governmental status, under Israeli law the organization has been granted an additional special status and enjoys all the privileges of a public authority (Adalah et al. v. The Israel Land...
As a public body, the ILA is, in theory, prohibited from discriminating against citizens in allocating land. Yet the JNF interprets the Memorandum as requiring that JNF land be tendered to Jews only. In response to a petition from Adalah, The Legal Center for Minority Rights in Israel, issued on October 13, 2004, the JNF claimed again that its responsibility is to the Jewish people and to Jewish settlement in the land of Israel: “The JNF, as the owner of the JNF land, does not have a duty to practice equality towards all citizens of the state” (Adalah et al. v. The Israel Land Administration et al., H.C. 9205/04 [case pending]). Again, spatial control of the Palestinian population through legal means is a critical component of enacting Jewish colonial domination and erasing Palestinian presence.

While the law, and especially land law, has affected Palestinians equally, it is important to recognize that the effects of the law are not equally distributed; indeed, their colonial effects are experienced differently by men and women. It is important to acknowledge that colonialism and colonial rule have, in general, not treated women kindly.

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Administration et al. H.C. 9205/04 [case pending]). The ILA Law of 1960 allocates 50% of the seats on the ILA Council to the JNF, giving it substantial control over Israeli land policies and consequently over 93% of the country’s land holdings (ILA 2010). The JNF also controls 13% of what is known as “Israel Lands” through a special arrangement it made with the state. The JNF ’acquired” nearly 2,000,000 dunams, or approximately 78% of its current holdings, from the state in 1949 and 1953, virtually all of which was owned by Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons (i.e., Arabs). In 1961, the ILA agreed to administer all JNF land, with the Memorandum and Articles of Association. Significantly, the Memorandum makes clear that the JNF’s mission is to acquire, in the future, even more property in Israel ”for the purpose of settling Jews on such lands and properties” (Adalah et al. v. The Israel Land Administration et al., H.C. 9205/04 [case pending]).

In July of 2007, the Knesset passed P/17/2711, the Bill of Israel Land Administration Law (2007), by a large majority, a law stipulating that the JNF’s allocation of its land to Jews only “will not be seen as improper discrimination” (2007, 2). Furthermore, the bill states that ”For the purpose of every law, the association documents of the Jewish National Fund will be interpreted according to the judgment of the Jewish National Fund’s founders and from a nationalist-Zionist standpoint.” The JNF plays a central role in determining Israel’s land policy because of its close relationship with the ILA. The land that the JNF tenders, likewise, is distinguishable from other land tendered by the ILA only in that it is available exclusively to Jews. This discrimination, which is taking place on a large scale—on over 13% of ILA-administered land—creates a public perception that discrimination against Arab citizens is normative and benign and does not contradict their civic status as citizens of the state and as such they are equal to Jewish citizens. However, the Bill of Israel Land Administration law signals that Palestinian citizens of Israel are not equal to Jewish citizens in particular aspects of their citizenship. Nor can they contest such discrimination based on their civic status. Moreover, they are expected to obediently accept this minoritization, leaving unquestioned the implications for the very meanings of citizenship as well as for their civic and political rights.

Discrimination in the uses of space is not limited to land ownership but permeates down even to the “local” community level, affecting the rights of communities to move and choose across space. Examples abound, but for the purposes of this article two will suffice: In Jaffa (a southern Palestinian neighborhood of Tel Aviv and an autonomous Palestinian municipality until 1948), a Jewish community sought to restrict access to its public pool, allowing Arab residents to use the pool only one day every fortnight (Ori 2008). Recently, the Misgav bloc of communities in the Galilee region sought to restrict residency in their communities to those who accept “Zionist values and principles” (Mahajna 2009).
As primary caretakers of family and community, they have carried the burden of righting, as much as they are able, the sociopolitical disorder produced by colonial domination. Women who previously had access to land have been forced to become dependent upon male family members, and have seen their status reduced and their freedom curtailed or lost (Boserup 1990, 23; Merry 2007). For Bedouin women living in unrecognized villages, these gender-specific effects of colonialism must be examined in relation to the normalization of spatial discrimination against Palestinians in Israel. Here, I offer a closer feminist examination of women’s daily struggles within this context of colonialism and “legalized” discrimination. The centrality of spatial discrimination in its various forms emerges clearly from women’s voices, suggesting the importance that women accord to the need for addressing the interlocking effect of space, race, and law in challenging such oppression.

This perspective is articulated by Fatmeh, a 25-year-old Palestinian woman who described the ordeal that led to her separation from her husband:

I am living alone with my three children. My husband is my cousin, but he doesn’t have an Israeli ID, for after 1948, my family was granted Israeli citizenship, while his family was not ... And don’t get me wrong, both families used to live in the same village; it is just arbitrary political decisions that resulted in our becoming citizens and them not. Two years ago, while my husband was getting treatment—he was very sick—the doctor informed the police that he is an illegal [resident], and they arrested him in the hospital, right in his hospital bed, and deported him. Now, I am alone without him, and we are deprived of having our family together. I tried many times to see him, but walking in the desert, looking for him while pregnant, made me lose my third child ... They do not want us to have children, or families ... all is politics, no family, no home, no rights ...

Fatmeh spoke to me on June 17, 2009, the same day I was scheduled to give a presentation at a conference organized by Ma’an. She was looking for a way to reunite her family and to get a permit to remain on her land and maintain a home. She sat with me for a long time, sharing her suffering, and explaining how Israel’s laws resulted in her miscarrying her child; these laws have separated her family and prevented its members from inhabiting a safe home despite her status as a “citizen” and an indigenous native. In our hour-and-a-half-long talk, she repeatedly stressed points like the following: “They do not want us here, they will only help Jews,” and “The state doesn’t want us to have children or get married because we are not Jews ... we are not Jewish women ... do you get it?”

As Fatmeh’s testimony underscores, Israel asserts itself as the homeland of the Jewish people, and as such the place of women in maintaining a Jewish demographic majority plays a critical role in the public discourse. In keeping with the goal of

14 The Coalition for Bedouin Women. In Arabic, Ma’an means “together.”
15 Thus, for example, David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), one of Israel’s founders and its first prime minister (1948–1953, then prime minister again in 1955–1963), stated that “any Jewish woman who, as far as it depends on her, does not bring into the world at least four healthy children” is akin to “a soldier who evades
preserving Jewish demographic dominance, several laws have been enacted to discourage the growth of the Palestinian population within Israel. One of the most controversial of these is the “Nationality and Entry into Israel Law,” passed by the Sixteenth Knesset on July 31, 2003. The bill grew out of an initiative by Interior Minister Eli Yishai who had, the year before, instructed his legal advisors to explore the possibility of introducing legislation to reduce the number of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians whom he referred to as “residents of the region” and who had obtained Israeli citizenship through marriage to Palestinians within pre-1967 Israel (Rouhana and Sultany 2003). Under this law, Palestinian citizens of Israel who marry a Palestinian resident of the West Bank or Gaza are not permitted to live with their spouses within Israel. Previously, Palestinian spouses had the right to live together within the boundaries of pre-1967 Israel on the basis of what is known as “family unification.” The law was eventually amended, limiting the prohibition to West Bank Palestinian men between the ages of 14 and 35 and Palestinian women between the ages of 14 and 25—that is, prime marital age. As Fatmeh’s story illustrates, Palestinian citizens of Israel were thus faced with a deeply difficult personal choice: Either refrain from marrying Palestinians who are not approved by Israel, or uproot their existing lives in Israel (where they may and probably have family, jobs, and property), lose their historical connection with their land, and go live under military occupation; or live apart, across a border that is increasingly hard to cross.

When advocates for Palestinians within Israel petitioned for the repeal of the Nationality and Entry into Israel Law in 2006, Israel’s High Court of Justice (HCJ) upheld the law by a vote of six in favor and five against. The justices writing for the majority reasoned that the law does not violate the right to family life enshrined in Israel’s Basic Laws. Citing Israel’s security needs, the majority reasoned that because the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) (established in Ramallah in 1994) is waging a war or “quasi-war” against Israel, the law creates a permissible distinction between family unification among citizens and “enemy nationals” and family unification among citizens and those who are not “enemy nationals” (Adalah 2009a ). Of course, the casting of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza as “enemy nationals” is perverse, since Israel retains effective control over both of those territories and over the movement of their populations. In March of 2009, the HCJ heard petitions from human rights advocates against this law and subsequent amendments...
that had added new prohibitions against Palestinians in Israel marrying and living with spouses from several other “enemy” Arab and Muslim states.16

While political leaders in Israel claim that Palestinians and Jews are viewed as equal citizens under the law and that equality is a central premise of citizenship, the development of land laws and related policies undoubtedly reveal a very different reality. Moreover, the forms, fine texts, exceptions, and contrasting rules of the Israeli legal system betray a very specific grammar of rights which forges completely different realities for those who are Jewish and those who are Palestinian. In other words, side by side with international human rights and basic laws to which Israel is ostensibly committed (the “outwardly facing” obligations), there is a web of more detailed rules and bureaucratic minutiae (the inwardly applicable regulations) that translate the supposed general rights which Israel claims to uphold into the daily grind of asphyxiating realities, realities which can only be fully seen and understood if we engage with and learn from the experience and meaning-making processes of those whose lives are inescapably governed by those rules. For Palestinian citizens of Israel, both women and men, these realities are far from rights-based. Indeed, under current Israeli practice, segregation and racially restrictive covenants are legal, and those who run the Israeli system feel comfortable enforcing these measures. For Palestinian citizens of Israel, this means that the effects of their original dispossession in 1948 continue unabated, mobilized and justified through a discourse of fear which promotes a “politics of fear” and privileges “security” over any genuine pursuit of equality and universal citizen rights.

**Conclusion: Contesting the Grammar of Rights**

I am a mother of eight children, but I am unrecognized; I live in an unrecognized village ... We are all unrecognized. My daughter acquired an education, and works now as a secretary, but she is also unrecognized; her son who was born only two years ago is not registered nor recognized, and has no ID number because his father—my brother's son—is from El Samou'u [a village in the Hebron area of the West Bank]... wallah Hada qaderallehein [No one is capable of handling them, i.e., the Israelis]. What human rights are you talking about? Here in our village, there is no law, there are no rights, nor humans, there is only Israel.

Zeinab, 37 years old

Listening to Palestinian women's voices regarding human rights activism in the context of Israel's legal structure, whereby the self is conflated with the unrecognized collective identity, raises substantive questions: What happens when human rights defenders try to name or make visible subjects that have been regulated to unrecognized spaces and imprisoned in their unconscionability? Is there something to be said for their very

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unnameability, when the ideology behind their invisibility is at the core of power and of creating the im/possibilities to escape it? How does the encounter with unrecognized women, by way of their ghostly nature, prove to be “dangerous” to the colonizer? How does the encounter with the Bedouin women’s reality disrupt, critique, and at times, escape classist, racist, sexist, and homophobic structures of power and being?

Mapping and remapping the context in which Palestinian women in Israel, mainly Bedouin women in unrecognized villages, resist the everydayness of their oppression as invisibilized, requires that we determine what can be done in a space that fundamentally fears their unrecognizability and denies their existence. The question herein is how can human rights activism possibly become an effective and independent activism when the people they defend are un-recognized in their totality as citizens—a status that makes them not fully eligible for acknowledgment, let alone protection unless approved by the colonizer?

As discussed in this paper, human rights groups face immense difficulties due to the grammar of rights embedded in the Israeli institution. Human rights groups might place emphasis on the suffering experienced by Bedouin women in order to evoke (as Allen, 2009 might argue) both sympathy for the sufferers and outrage against the perpetrators of violence; yet they fail to combat the grammar of rights as evidenced in their continual failings to achieve change in the Naqab.

This paper is only a first step in my attempt to understand whether and in what ways human rights activism can challenge power holders in colonized contexts such as Israel. The multiplicity of women’s challenges and losses—as in Salwa’s case—adds to the plurality of the “spheres” of oppression and becomes entangled with the state’s ideology and regulations to dominate the everydayness of women’s lives. Furthermore, what I have learned from Zeinab’s and other women’s voices is that the institutionalized arrangements against which human rights activism operates, in the context of the colonial state’s laws, tie the hands of activists and allow them to work only from within the rules and regulations of the “prison” that unrecognized women live within, leading ultimately to the reproduction of the status quo. When dealing with “communities of otherness” or communities that live in unrecognized villages, institutionalized activism requires coordination with internal (Bedouin men), intra-state, and inter-state laws and regulations. In that sense, women’s personal perceptions of the violation of their human rights in relation to political structures (both the local and global) should inform such activism. Human rights activism should be analyzed from the bottom up—beginning with women’s own voices and life experiences—and in terms of the context of power relations, historical injustices, and pervasive political inequalities.

The historically constituted structures and practices of oppression within which human rights activism is governed should never disappear when we propose critical feminist analyses that rely on women’s voices. The critical human rights analysis suggested in this article requires a theoretical and conceptual framework that allows us to think
about feminist human rights activism beyond the realm of legal (and state-centered) doctrine, but also beyond the extra- and para-legal realms. “Bringing in” the ordeal of those whose rights were violated contests the grammar of rights and power that monopolize and orchestrate human rights activism (Razack 2007). I believe that a critical feminist human rights framework and activism should be independent from the state structure, including its legal system. The activism should be guided not only by the need to challenge patriarchy or racist violations of rights alone, but also to challenge the colonial system that exists in Israel. It is foundational that feminist activism/politics and theorization does not overlook women’s own experiences and ordeals.

In the Palestinian Bedouin case-study, as in similar colonial contexts, for human rights organizations working inside the colonial regime to serve the local community in a feminist manner, they need to adopt a strategy of prioritizing women’s political, civil, social and economic voices and rights, while challenging the colonial structure. The question becomes: How can human rights organizations compliantly and effectively function under a regime whose entire legal system is designed to privilege one group of citizens and diminish another? As it stands today, the human rights framework functions, on the one hand, to resist and destabilize the effects of the colonial regime, while at the same time it legitimizes the rules of the regime and preserves the regime’s grammar of rights. Because human rights work prescribes a catalogue of allowable activities and interventions that open the door for it to bargain with the state, it risks reinforcing the colonial grammar of rights rather than revolutionizing the power dynamics between the parties. As long as human rights activists and defenders claim non-accountability, and seek to advise, analyze or influence policy makers without directly engaging in politics, they will continue, as women sharply explained, to be imprisoned, trapped or coopted by the colonial regime. This non-accountability and its top-down approach often results in adopting the colonizer’s grammar of rights uncritically, and even further marginalizing the voices of the colonized because they are “ungrammatical.” The data of our study shows clearly that such unaccountability paired with immunity of state sovereignty opens the doors to corruption, exploitation, and further women’s oppression. To address such hardship, I suggest that human rights organizations working in colonial contexts be regulated either by an international regulating framework, or by a bottom-up women-focused and controlled one. Making human rights activism accountable to women’s experiences and international regulatory systems may be a possible means to challenge the colonizer’s grammar of rights.

To begin to answer the questions raised in this paper, proponents of human rights activism must expose the laws, regulations, and practices that preserve the colonial grammar of rights. To do so, such activists should connect themselves to women who are defending themselves against the daily violations of humanity and dignity, which flow from the racism embedded in colonization, and work to eradicate their oppression—thereby directly challenging the rules of the colonizers. Therefore, the only struggle I see possible against raced, classed, and gendered politico-economic and legal exclusion is to engender a
paradigm shift in the human rights framework in colonial settings, for as Lorde reminds us “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984). Lorde’s insight calls on us to contextually analyze policies, strategies, and other tools of “emancipation”—including human rights activism—while keeping in mind that violations of women’s human rights in colonial contexts happen quickly and work in a spiral fashion that is affected by the systems and structures of domination of the oppressors. As with the similar feminist dialogue that was termed “transversal” (Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997; Cockburn & Hunter 1999), the boundaries of the grammar of rights, including the dialogue between human rights activism and power holders, suggest “the boundaries of the dialogue should be determined by common political emancipatory goals while tactical and strategic priorities should be led by those whose needs are judged by participants of the dialogue to be the most urgent” (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 206). Proposing a feminist analysis for the Grammar of Rights model calls us to attend to such transversality while being cognizant of differential positionings of power, in which different groups are located in specific historical contexts within the dynamics of power relations. It calls on us to be aware of the contested nature of boundaries, political claims, and social and gendered positionings.

Mapping the raced “legal” articulations reflected in Israel’s laws and regulations, uncovering the cultivation of fear that buffers, reproduces, and promotes them—that is, mapping through listening to women’s daily ordeals—suggests that only through tearing down racialized operating systems can one make use of human rights principles. Acting against Israeli violations without tracing them to their historical roots and without examining the state’s actions as policies that deny the colonized the ability to recall and retell their histories and thus to demand and claim their rights, leaves the voiceless voiceless and the status quo unchallenged. Rendering invisible the political struggle that problematizes and contests the state’s boundaries further excludes and marginalizes certain groups of people.

Understanding women’s insights requires that we examine the archeology of rights and its hegemonic grammar as practiced in the Naqab area. The voices revealed that the existing “grammar of rights” translates the language of human rights and presents it according to colonial ideology—in order to be seen as credible—in the right time, space, and place—much as natural languages must be ordered in a certain way in order to be heard as grammatical. Such a “grammar of rights” was found to have at least two levels in the modern colonial context, one international and one internal, which sometimes conform and sometimes conflict with one another. The international language of rights stresses commitment to international norms of democracy, equality, neutrality, and rule of law; whereas the “inward facing” grammar of bureaucratic regulations, court rulings, and laws betray the reality of how these obligations are applied into an “asphyxiating reality”. The colonial power uses the international language when confronted with fully external actors in order to achieve international legitimacy, while using the “inward facing” grammar to
shape, authorize, impede or promote the way human rights activism is performed, so as to serve the interests of the colonial power.

The work of human rights activists, as portrayed by the women respondents, fails to account for the history of injustice the women have suffered; it seeks to redress present wrongs without considering historical events, which for the women interviewed, are as vivid and relevant today as current events. Because human rights activists fail to comprehend the significance and meaning of the Bedouin's history, they identify very different priorities—and push for different political choices—than the interviewed women.

Human rights activism that accepts the state's regulations can be characterized as further undermining the prevailing dehumanization of the unrecognized. If such unrecognizability is to be subverted, human rights activists must refuse complicity with a colonial paradigm that has historically refrained from such exchanges with those it dominates. Instead, they should aim at destabilizing the contemporary practices of the state of Israel, which reproduces its Zionist colonial nature while nullifying Palestinians' rights to recognition.

Refusing the top-down approach while using the analytical tool of the grammar of rights requires that we either consider alternatives to the governing of human rights sectors—including refraining from allowing centralized governmental authorities to regulate it—and/or explore the possibility of developing de-territorialized virtual spaces that escape the constraints of intrastate constraints. The latter could be achieved through the development of transnational organized entities that aren't constricted by the colonial grammar of rights, and that generate new languages and new alternatives furnished with Bedouin women's-centered grammatical rules. If we fail to find alternatives to the present framework, it is likely we will continue to reproduce the oppressive ideologies that true human rights activism seeks to escape, and continue reinforcing a colonial grammar of rights. Only by listening attentively to the voices of “invisible” and unrecognized women can we create a new grammar of rights, one that is guided by women's own voices, and based on the languages of equality, respect and dignity.

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