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Funding Pain: Bedouin Women and Political Economy in the Naqab/Negev

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ABSTRACT

This contribution focuses on the experiences and voices of Palestinian Bedouin women surviving and challenging Israeli colonial policies while residing in their own land and, in particular, the Bedouin women of the Naqab living in unrecognized villages. Through interviews and focus groups, this study learns from and engages with the voices of Palestinian Bedouin women because colonized women’s criticisms of the political economic apparatus are seldom invoked to influence policy. Exploring these women’s voices offers an opportunity to examine the political economy of their unrecognized, officially nonexistent villages and homes and to rectify the gap in bottom-up knowledge of political economy by investigating the institutional structures that define and circumscribe women’s lives. Privileging Bedouin women’s production of knowledge carries the analytical value of studying political economy based on women’s own experiences and struggles against hegemony.

KEYWORDS

Bedouin women, political economy, Palestine, Israel

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INTRODUCTION

Colonized women’s perceptions and criticisms of the political economic apparatus are seldom invoked to influence policy. Learning from and engaging with the voices of Palestinian Bedouin women from the Naqab/Negev region in southern Israel (hereafter the Naqab), this study seeks to remedy this absence of bottom-up knowledge of political economy by investigating the institutional structures that define and circumscribe the women’s lives. Privileging Bedouin women’s production of knowledge carries the analytical value of studying political economy through women’s
own experiences to centralize their struggle for a more contextualized practice and politics.

Women’s participation in the contemporary political economy is complex, especially for those designated as cultural/religious/ethnic/racial Others. More often than not, the role of Othered women in the political economy is embedded in a wider discourse of culturalization, where, supposedly, their culture is the hindrance to their full participation and is directly or indirectly responsible for the socioeconomic disadvantages they face (Gamze Çavdar and Yavuz Yaşar 2014). In Jennifer C. Olmsted’s (2002) response to Shoshana Grossbard-Shechtman’s and Shoshana Neuman’s article (1998) on the impact of religion on the value of married women’s time, Olmsted points to ways in which analyses of Arab women, in particular, promote and endorse a fundamental culturalization of their problems and often lapse into Orientalist images of cultural and patriarchal oppression. Olmsted’s call to thoughtfully disentangle religious, political, cultural, social, historical, and economic factors is of particular importance when engaging with women’s words and descriptions of their socioeconomic disadvantages.

This study focuses, generally, on the experiences and voices of Palestinian Bedouin women surviving, resisting, and challenging Israeli colonial policies while residing in their own land and, in particular, the Bedouin women of the Naqab living in what the Israeli state has officially defined as “unrecognized” villages. As many scholars have argued, Bedouin women in the Naqab are frequently portrayed as typical Third World women whose lives are culturally restrained and bound by patriarchy, whose oppression is ahistorical and rooted in their culture and is therefore beyond the scope of contemporary political economy (Tovi Fenster 2002; Henrique Dahan-Kalev, Niza Yanay, and Niza Berkovitch 2005; Ismael Abu-Saad 2008; Çavdar and Yaşar 2014). Exploring these women’s voices offers an opportunity to examine the political economy of their unrecognized, officially nonexistent villages and homes (Haya Noach 2009). Some 35 percent (or 70,000) of the 200,000 Naqab Bedouin population lives in approximately thirty-five or forty unrecognized villages that, due to their status, are accorded no state services and exist under the constant threat of demolition (Farah Mihlar 2011: 3). Even the remaining population living in recognized villages or government-planned townships may endure an unrecognized status of sorts, with Bedouin society, culture, and politics typically misrepresented and unacknowledged in the wider Israeli setting. Not only do dominant Israeli/Zionist narratives create an image of the Bedouin as an ahistorical, apolitical, and nomadic people (Ronen Shamir 1996; Oren Yiftachel 2008), but the designation of state land as Jewish has also meant that Palestinian Bedouin people have no rights to the land on religious grounds – despite their formal status as Israeli citizens (Haneen Zoabi 2009). As Abu-Saad suggests, “After more than half a century as citizens of Israel, the [Bedouin] remain illegal invaders, and a threat to the vision of Zionism,” and are as
such “reduced to the illegitimate and dehumanized status of ‘the non-Jewish threat’ ” in the Naqab (2008: 1745). This categorization renders invisible the Bedouin’s legitimate claims and rights to the land as an indigenous people (Shamir 1996; Amal Jamal 2007), while also justifying the Israeli settler colonial policies and practices that maintain the Bedouin’s unrecognized status and define the uncertainty of daily life in the Naqab (Yiftachel 2008).

As both indigenous and non-Jewish, the Bedouin in the Naqab occupy a space of “unrecognizability” sustained by a state structure unwilling to acknowledge their historic, social, economic, and cultural relationship to the land ([Sandy] Alexander Kedar 2004; Noach 2009). The women’s voices central to this study suggest that such unrecognizability is supplemented by an international perception of Bedouin society as one in need of modernization and Western-style “development” – a positioning that is also highly racialized and gendered. This Orientalist representation of Bedouin society is replicated and repeated in numerous Western and Zionist discourses and forums (Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2012). Bedouin women’s voices suggest that the notion of the “average third world woman’s oppression” these Orientalist representations indicate is embedded in and guides hegemonic discourses of development in the Naqab, as well as the funding agendas of donors (Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1988). According to some Bedouin women, donor funding agendas are regularly experienced as endeavors that aim to “save” the Bedouin from their cultural “backwardness” (Abu-Saad 2008), and, in the context of women, are often akin to the colonial notion of “saving the brown woman from the brown man” (Lila Abu-Lughod 2002: 784). In this context, unrecognizability is a cycle maintained by the Israeli state as well as by the funding agendas of many donors, through both culturalized and mythologized conceptions of Bedouin disadvantage.

This study argues that a political economy of “funding pain” – an economy of international donors offering funding through the lens of Arab/Muslim/Bedouin women’s individualized and violent oppression – emerges from this paradigm, where the overall context of undermining development (or “de-development”) facing Bedouin people in the Naqab is bound to and propelled by two colonial logics (Sara Roy 1999). One such logic is that of the colonial state toward an indigenous Palestinian minority, which creates and maintains poverty through colonial practices of denying land and resources and by limiting avenues of integration into the state’s dominant economy. The other logic is that of donors who interpret the oppression of Bedouin women through colonial mythologies of culture, thereby individualizing the collective struggle of the unrecognized communities and focusing on (mis)perceptions and (mis)interpretations of gender dynamics and individual empowerment (of women). Together, these logics echo a colonial understanding and ordering of the world into racial hierarchies which become entrenched in political economy. Furthermore, and most significantly in the context of donors who proclaim to improve the
lives of the Bedouin, both logics fail to acknowledge Bedouin struggles in the Naqab as battles for collective indigenous rights, and in doing so work to stifle anti-colonial rhetoric and practice.

METHODOLOGY

The voices of the Bedouin women that drive this study were gathered between 2009 and 2011 through extensive interviews, focus groups, and participatory observations with women living in unrecognized villages in the Naqab. The interviews and focus groups centered on Bedouin women’s experiences of human rights activism. The individual interviews with twenty Bedouin women took place in the women’s own houses, following their approval and consent. Each interview lasted over two hours to allow women to share their stories of life in the Naqab and to reflect on the effect of donor policies, politics, and modes of intervention on their lives. The interviewed women ranged from 19 to 60 years old: nine were 30–49 years old, three were over 50 years old, and the remaining eight women were between 19 and 30 years old. Analyses of the individual interviews were shared, examined, and validated through two workshops. The first workshop comprised a small group that met in May 2011 to study the insights gained from the women interviewed. The second workshop was a public forum in June 2012 aimed at sharing the study results more widely with women activists and Bedouin women and men.

The first workshop was organized by Dr. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and coordinated with Ma’an – The Coalition of Bedouin Women in May of 2011. The workshop took place at Mada al-Carmel – Arab Center for Applied Social Research in Haifa, a location chosen by the nine women in attendance from Ma’an. Dr. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and two research assistants also participated in the workshop. The three-hour meeting was opened with an explanation of the purpose of the study, which was to juxtapose ordinary women’s critiques of the politics of funding with the experiences of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the Naqab. The participants were asked to speak on three major issues: (1) their experience with funding organizations; (2) the influence of funding on women’s lives in the Naqab; and (3) to tell a story that might be an example of their experience. After the introduction, the group was separated into three smaller groups, each one nominating a moderator and a representative to share the discussion with the other two groups. After discussions in the small groups, the participants met again, and representatives shared what had been discussed in their small groups, which was followed by a dialogue on the raised topics. Following the workshop, the lead researcher and the research assistants met to reflect on the meeting. This process was meant to enhance understanding of the insights shared by the women, and the
research assistants who joined the workshop helped the researchers confirm and endorse the findings gathered from the individual interviews.

The second workshop was organized in the Naqab area, and took place at Ma’an – The Coalition of Bedouin Women. The invitation was open to the public, and aimed at sharing the results of the study, gathering the locals’ reactions and criticism, and verifying the study’s results. The twenty-eight participants of the workshop included social and political activists from various feminist, women’s, and other local and national NGOs. The three-hour meeting took place in June 2012.

UNRECOGNIZED CITIZENS IN THE NAQAB

The Bedouin occupy a unique space in the Israeli context. Despite their forced expulsion along with other Palestinians in 1948 and transfer en masse to their current location in the Naqab/Negev area, the Bedouin are nevertheless one of the few Arab groups to have a sizeable (albeit increasingly under threat) hold on the land (Sholmo Swirski and Yael Hasson 2006: 2). In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, the Bedouin are accorded a unique, yet inferior, citizenship status in Israel and perceived as almost entirely superfluous to the Israeli economy and society (Yiftachel 2008).

In terms of socioeconomic status, Palestinian Bedouin people in the Naqab are among the worst-off groups in a society where Jewish–Arab discrepancies are already significant (Shlomo Swirski 2007; Suleiman Abu Bader and Daniel Gottlieb 2009; Association for Civil Rights in Israel [ACRI] 2011) and where there are acknowledged poverty gaps between the Jewish majority and Palestinian minority. According to the Israeli National Insurance Institute, 49.4 percent of Arab families in Israel are considered poor, compared to 19.9 percent of all families (Miri Endeweld, Alex Fruman, Netanela Barkali, and Daniel Gottlieb 2008: 16, 22). This is a statistically significant overrepresentation of Arabs among the poor when one considers that Arab citizens account for approximately 20 percent of the overall population. As the National Insurance Institute acknowledges, “there is a large, almost threefold gap between Arab families’ share of the entire population and their share of the poor population” (Endeweld et al. 2008: 80). Palestinians consistently rank below Jewish citizens across a wide range of socioeconomic indicators, leading the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to conclude that “in terms of economic well-being, the Arab Israeli population is at a net disadvantage compared to the Jewish population” (Jack Habib, Judith King, Assaf Ben Shoham, Abraham Wolde-Tsadick, and Karen Lasky 2010: 34).

The level of disadvantages experienced by Palestinian citizens of Israel is widely recognized to be a result of official and unofficial discrimination. As Katie Hesketh, working with Adalah – The Legal Center for Arab Minority
Rights in Israel, has documented, Arabs encounter discrimination in employment opportunities, pay, and working conditions due to inadequate implementation of the law as well as structural barriers (2011). This discrimination is compounded over multiple levels, with Arab women in particular faring worse than Arab men. For instance, the number of Arab women aged 15 years and older in the civilian workforce is 21.1 percent, compared to 57 percent of Jewish women. These are among the lowest figures in the world concerning women’s workforce participation and are well below other OECD countries where 58 percent of women participate in paid work (OECD 2010: 8).

While the economic situation of the Palestinian Bedouin in unrecognized villages has not been fully or adequately documented by the state (Abu Bader and Gottlieb 2009; Adalah 2010), the statistics available attest to conditions of extreme discrimination. Statistical reports of poverty are far higher among the Bedouin population, where some 67.2 percent of families are considered poor (OECD 2008: 31) – figures that are likely higher in reality when one considers that the unrecognized villages are not included in formal statistics. Even so, Palestinian Bedouin people are reported among the lowest in terms of socioeconomic indicators; indeed, out of the eight local councils and municipalities ranked within “cluster one” (the poorest of the Israeli 10-point scale), seven are Bedouin villages in the Naqab (Ahmad Sheikh Muhammad and Mohammad Khatib 2011). These Bedouin villages are afforded no official status and referred to as “illegal clusters” unrecognized by the state, and although levels of poverty and social deprivation are significantly higher in these areas, accurate representations of the poverty and deprivation are not included in state statistical calculations and publications (Abu Bader and Gottlieb 2009; Hesketh 2011). Lack of official statistics documenting socioeconomic conditions in the unrecognized villages is a significant matter of concern for many, including the women in our study. As we hear from the various narratives shared in the individual and focus group meetings and as Samia, a Bedouin woman in her late twenties from an unrecognized village, notes, “[the] statistics don’t reflect my situation as a woman … And that means I will never get any support.” Furthermore, when statistics do exist, they are often inaccurate or partial. As Samia suggests: “In my tribe, the statistics show that we have eighty kids. But actually we have over 180 kids. So if they have eighty kids formally registered instead of 180, they’re not opening health centers, schools or nurseries, and definitely not transportation.”

While direct state policy measures to reduce poverty disproportionately target Jewish Israelis over Arabs (with the result of Arab poverty declining by just 13.5 percent in 2008 due to such measures, compared to 46.2 percent for Jewish citizens [Endeweld et al. 2008: 15]), poverty is actually exacerbated by these policy measures in the unrecognized villages of the Naqab. Officially, these villages do not exist. They are excluded from
state planning and government maps; they have no local representative councils or are inadequately represented as part of other local governing bodies; and they receive little to no basic services, including health and educational facilities, telephone lines, or even electricity and running water (Adalah 2010: 21). The particular consequences of this state-driven system of unrecognizability on Bedouin women in the Naqab has been of concern for some time, and in 2005 the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women noted:

Bedouin women living in the Negev desert remain in a vulnerable and marginalized situation, especially in regard to education, employment and health. The committee is especially concerned about the situation of Bedouin women who live in unrecognized villages with poor housing conditions and limited or no access to water, electricity and sanitation. (UN CEDAW 2005: 7)

The situation in the unrecognized villages is rendered worse by a persistent state policy of house demolition. While official figures are hard to come by, between 2000 and 2007 at least 3,084 Palestinian homes were estimated to have been destroyed in Israel, of which a vast majority were in the Naqab (Adalah 2010: 20). While housing demolitions are legally supported under the pretext of Bedouin violations of land and planning laws (Human Rights Watch 2008), it is apparent that the policy is one of dispossession: designed to get rid of the unrecognized villages as a means to force villagers into overcrowded and impoverished government-planned townships grouped in just 0.8 percent of the entire Naqab area (Adalah 2010: 21). Sari Hanafi terms this “spacio-cide,” whereby the state’s intention is to “appropriate land while ignoring the people on it” (2009: 106). Spacio-cide describes the destruction of Palestinian space, the transfer and relocation of Palestinians away from their land and the view of Jewish Israeli citizens, and the intensification of borders and boundaries between indigenous people and the colonizing society (Hanafi 2009: 106–7).

Through the state policy of house demolition, a number of unrecognized Bedouin villages have been wholly or partially demolished in recent years – including Al-Araqib, which, at the time of writing, has been demolished over forty times since July 2010. With the approval of the Prawer Plan in September 2011, which will forcibly displace some 40,000 Bedouin people to townships, the situation in the unrecognized villages will undoubtedly become worse despite the plan’s supposedly “enlightened” intentions which arguably support a culturalized and Orientalized settler colonial agenda. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu claims that the Prawer Plan will “allow for home construction according to the law and for the development of enterprises and employment [for the Bedouin community]. This will jump the population forward and provide it with economic independence”
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(2011). The Prawer Plan thus operates under a guise of “modernizing” the Bedouin community by according them socioeconomic independence and a lawful status. Despite claims to the contrary, however, there is little question that state-sponsored housing demolition and the forced relocation of Bedouins are discriminatory policies enacted within a Zionist settler colonial framework: the “Judaization” of the Naqab (Abu-Saad 2008; Yiftachel 2008). Unlike Bedouin villages, Jewish inhabitants of the Naqab are both supported and promoted, with individual settlements generally occupied by a single Jewish family provided with hundreds and sometimes thousands of dunams of land for their exclusive use. In 2005, there were approximately sixty such settlements, stretching over 81,000 dunams of land (Hana Hamdan 2005). Policies that support the allocation of significant amounts of land to one group in the Naqab while demolishing the homes and attempting to forcibly relocate another strongly testify (at the very least) to a lack of government commitment to ensure equal access to the land for the entire population of the Naqab.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF UNRECOGNIZABILITY IN THE NAQAB

Since I was born, I knew that as Bedouin living in this area, we are not noticed at all, we are not counted, even when dead, we are not wanted, for they want to settle Jews in our land, and not Palestinians; we are not respected, for all they do is step on our dignity every time they mention us… Just look at the way my late father was treated by Israeli officials… they used to come, eat at our place, but talk to him from a distance; they are disgusted by us. This is how I was also treated when searching for a job… As if the land is not ours, the place is not ours, and even the right to live… the mere living, is not ours. (Nuha, feminist activist, 32 years old)

Nuha’s voice and analysis is indicative of her profound sense of disempowerment and anger, which cuts to the core of her existence and raises questions about the possibilities of genuine social and economic development in the Naqab. For Nuha, the issue of development is almost spurious in the context of her unrecognized status; as she puts it simply, “so you don’t have water and you don’t have electricity, how do you expect us to transform economically?” It is possible to argue that the fundamental issue at stake is not one of expecting Bedouins to “transform economically” despite the daily challenges they face, but rather – as Nuha’s words clearly suggest – of locking them into an overall and explicit situation of de-development and slow erasure. Sara Roy defines de-development as not only “distort[ing] the development process, but undermining it entirely… A de-developed economy is deprived of its capacity for production, rational
 structural transformation and meaningful reform, making it incapable even of distorted development” (1999: 65). Therefore, practices of de-development include:

Dispossession of key economic resources, preventing formation of productive capacity; integration and externalization, whereby Palestinian economic growth is conditioned on employment opportunities in the Israeli market and on externally generated sources of income, away from indigenous agriculture and industry, local economy and infrastructure is left with no resources. (Roy 1999: 65)

While de-development is a concept that emerged from the Palestinian context of the Gaza Strip, it is apparent that the situation of the Naqab – and especially the unrecognized villages – is exceptionally well captured in de-development’s purview.

For Bedouin women in the Naqab, disadvantage in the areas of paid employment, education, and health coalesce to produce a spiral effect of de-development, where each reinforces the other. In terms of paid employment, only a mere 16.8 percent of Arab women in the Naqab are part of the labor force, which is due in large part to the isolation of Bedouin villages (recognized and unrecognized) from larger cities, and hence there is limited access to paid labor opportunities and state-funded vocational trainings (Muhammad and Khatib 2011). There is an “almost total absence” of public transportation from and between Arab towns and villages, which, since the major public-transport system is majority owned by the government, is the responsibility of the state. Yet the lack of public transport services is not seriously acknowledged by the state as a structural barrier to paid employment, where “traditional values and cultural stigmas among the Arab population” are argued to be the decisive reasons in “defin[ing] the acceptable limits to traveling alone to school and work” (Adalah 2010: 9). However, as Raieda, a focus group participant (29 years old), asserts, “if we cannot reach anywhere and there are no buses and no streets and it’s very expensive, how do you want us to work?” Furthermore, the argument based on traditional values and cultural stigmas the state suggests ignores that very little attention has been paid to genuine cultural differences that must be taken into consideration with regard to the opportunities for paid employment of Bedouin women. Bedouin activists participating in one of the focus groups, for instance, spoke of refusing specific paid employment offered through government agencies because of low and potentially jeopardizing safety measures and “dress codes that do not fit their society.” Furthermore, during the focus group Bedouin women shared with the researchers the oppressive nature of the limited labor opportunities available to them. For example, private employment agencies provided them with jobs as cleaners in hotels, meaning the women
had to use transportation very early in the morning, returning back to their villages very late at night. The dress code for paid employment as cleaning women in such hotels was uncomfortable for the women because they were required to wear see-through shirts inappropriate to the Bedouin mode of dressing. Many women lost their chance to earn income due to such circumstances.

Moreover, low levels of employment for Bedouin women are to be expected considering the lack of schools and educational institutions for Palestinians in the Naqab (Sarab Abu Rabia-Queder 2006). No high schools exist in any of the unrecognized villages, and existing schools for the Bedouin suffer from serious underinvestment and underfunding. Some schools, for instance, lack basic services and facilities like toilets, electricity, telephone and internet connections, and sometimes even connecting roads (Adalah 2010: 39; ACRI 2011). This lack of basic facilities translates to a lack of professional staff. Rabha, a 30-year-old Bedouin social worker in a women’s organization, stated:

I want my kids to have modern development supported by professionals and not the old way of my mother. But the problem is the lack of professionalism of teachers and kindergarten teachers, [and] mainly [the need for teachers] who speak our language, and who do not look at us as dirt.

Rabha’s voice betrays her sensitivity to the lack of resources accessible to schools in the Naqab and raises an important issue: the lack of native Arabic-speaking teachers in schools.

For those living in unrecognized villages, the nearest schools are often kilometers away and difficult to access, both because of the lack of public transportation for students and many parents’ unwillingness to send their children (especially girls) outside the village. These circumstances contribute to high drop-out rates. In the region of Abu Tulul–ElShihabi, for example, around 750 students are of high school age, yet only 170 attend, with a dropout rate of 77 percent (Adalah 2010: 39). Such conditions compel us to revisit the individualizing concept of “dropping out,” to focus instead on the structural factors that shape students’ experiences at school. Illiteracy rates are high among Bedouin women in the Naqab, but especially among older women: in 2007, 13.5 percent of 35- to 29-year-olds were illiterate, compared to 92.3 percent among women 60 years and older (Hesketh 2011). The high levels of illiteracy among older Bedouin women mean that they have to depend on children or men to accompany them when they go out – not only because of tradition, but also because many of them cannot communicate in Hebrew or read road signs (Mihlar 2011: 5). This is particularly a problem when accessing basic health services.
While Bedouin in Israel have the highest rate of certain diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and asthma (Mihlar 2011: 4), the health situation is most critical in the unrecognized villages of the Naqab where the provision of health services is limited or nonexistent. There are only twelve clinics in the unrecognized villages, and these lack medical specialists, pharmacies, and Arabic-speaking staff; they are only capable of providing healthcare for 20 percent of all inhabitants in the Naqab (Adalah 2010: 33). Furthermore, the lack of clean drinking water causes significant health problems. Most residents in unrecognized villages obtain water via plastic hose hook-ups or unhygienic metal containers from single water points located on main roads far from their homes, a practice which contributes to higher rates of infant mortality among the Bedouin due to unclean water. For Palestinian Bedouin, the infant mortality rate in 2005 was 15 per 1,000 live births, an increase from 13.3 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2003 (Adalah 2010: 32). In 2008, infant mortality rates within the Jewish majority in Israel stood at 2.9 per 1,000 live births; for the Palestinian minority, it was double that at 6.5 per 1,000 live births (Central Bureau of Statistics 2009: 11). The persistently high rate of infant mortality is arguably compounded further by the lack of specialized healthcare for women and children; none of the clinics in the unrecognized villages employ pediatricians or gynecologists (Adalah 2010: 33).

The process of de-development in the Naqab, we argue, is embedded in a wider colonial fantasy and discourse of culturalization, where imagined ideas of culture are used to erase critical examination of socioeconomic inequities in a settler colonial context, and actual cultural differences are overlooked and left unexamined in relation to their effects on disadvantage. This is certainly a tactic adopted by the state — and one that is evidenced in the narrative of modernization embedded in government discourse surrounding the Prawer Plan. By arguing that the forced relocation of Bedouin will “jump the population forward,” Netanyahu speaks to the supposed “backwardness” of the Bedouin. His discourse suggests that Bedouin culture, which is bound to the land like indigenous peoples everywhere, is not “modern” enough and may, indeed, even be “pre-modern.” The socioeconomic difficulties and disadvantages facing the Bedouin people face are the result of their “backward” culture and are most certainly unrelated to government policies and (intentional) oversights. This external culturalization of oppression and disadvantage is something well understood by Bedouin women themselves. As Zakeyi, a 26-year-old woman from a village that was officially recognized but still suffers a lack of regular services, explains:

I am from a recognized village when it comes to building, but unrecognized when it comes to collecting trash... if they give water it’s only specific hours... and they give electricity when they activate the generator... At night we have to use gas, so if the statistics that there
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don’t have electricity and have to use gasoline lanterns.

Zakeyi’s argument is simple but powerful, and it is fundamentally grounded in the everyday lives of and conditions facing Bedouin women in the Naqab. As she alludes, the lack of services and social support for Bedouin communities in the Naqab ultimately has little to do with culture, if anything at all; rather, it is embedded in Israeli colonial, bureaucratic, legal, and political systems and is institutionalized as official state policy.

Considering official government policies of de-development and “pseudo-development” projects like the Prawer Plan, which are fundamentally settler colonial initiatives dressed up in the seemingly reasonable language of liberal modernization, the question herein is how the situation of the Bedouin of the Naqab can truly be improved; how can Bedouin women receive the basic services and social support accorded to Jewish Israeli citizens? Here, we shift to the other side of the issues raised by Bedouin women: the donors who fund the various NGOs that attempt to fill the enormous gaps left behind by Israeli government policies of neglect. As Elora Shehabuddin (2008) argues in relation to Bangladesh, poor Muslim women are often the focus of international and national humanitarian concern, although very little attention is ever paid to their own experiences and perspectives. This dynamic, we argue, is similarly present in the Naqab, where Bedouin women (especially from unrecognized villages) become the focus of a humanitarian concern that limits itself to individualizing and culturalizing discourses at the expense of actual engagement with state policies of Judaization. In such a context, Bedouin women’s patriarchal oppression is supposedly the central impediment to their socioeconomic disadvantage. The following description of one of the young Bedouin women participating in a SHATIL study tour of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) provided by the New Israel Fund illuminates this problematic dynamic:

Nida is the first Bedouin woman to study film and had to struggle long and hard to convince her father and eight brothers to let her do so. Despite their access to the internet, most of these women still dress modestly and go home to fathers and brothers who make the major decision in their lives – including whom and when they will marry. It’s one of the things they want to see changed.3

For the Bedouin women in the workshop, this translation of public issues of structural disadvantage into personal matters of patriarchal family dynamics as a central issue shaping their lives gives them a sense they are “on display”
and compelled to satisfy donors’ curiosity about their private lives. This sense, they suggested, structured their encounters with and experiences of various funding organizations.

**FUNDING PAIN AS COLONIAL EXHIBIT: WOMEN’S VOICES**

We became an exhibit... They [the donors] asked me to speak to an international conference, there were over 5,000 Jews; I was there and another Bedouin woman like me, and a head of an NGO, the three of us were the only Arab women. There were zacham sahyuni [many Zionists]; I needed to talk about myself as a Bedouin woman for the sake of funding. I told the audience about our needs, and they started asking me about my family, my husband, my feelings, about my fears... I told them about the problem of language and they asked me about my feelings toward mingling with people who are not from the family and they turned the problems in the Naqab into personal problems and they asked me to leave the Naqab alone and tell them my personal story. They started digging and digging. I felt uneasy. They were enthusiastically curious. I was in a dilemma. Should I say more to get more funding, or should I tell them that I can’t talk more about myself, and it’s not about me, it was about the Naqab. (Rab’aa, project coordinator in a small women’s NGO in the Naqab, 35 years old)

Commenting upon time spent in France in the eighteenth century, an Egyptian scholar noted, “one of the beliefs of the Europeans is that the gaze has no effect” (Timothy Mitchell 1988: 2). Mitchell explores this theme of imperialist curiosity and voyeurism and remarks, “Spectacles like the world exhibition and the Orientalist Congress set up the world as a picture. They ordered it up before an audience as an object on display, to be viewed, experienced and investigated” (6). For the Bedouin women, the location of this “exhibit” has now shifted to the colonized landscape of the Naqab and the indigenous Bedouin communities living there. Donors funding many of the NGOs that seek to engage with these communities have in fact brought this European “gaze” to Southern Israel, to the Bedouin villages unrecognized by the Israeli state. As we see in the quotation above, curiosity about Rab’aa’s private life was privileged over her own priority to fight for the recognition and survival of Bedouin communities. Just as curiosity mediated the relationship between Europe and the Middle East in the nineteenth century, so non-Europeans are again finding themselves on display – this time in order to create relationships with donors. And the gaze does have an effect. Edward W. Said famously articulates this effect in *Orientalism* (1978), whereby the West’s economy of knowledge about the East helped solidify and maintain the unequal power dynamic between Europeans and their colonial subjects. As Lila
Abu-Lughod reminds us, “it must be recalled that Orientalism was not just about representations or stereotypes of the Orient, but about how these were linked and integral to projects of domination that were ongoing” (2001: 105).

Representations of Arab and Muslim women perpetuated by Orientalist discourse reinforce perceptions of the supposed inferiority or backwardness of non-European peoples, and these perceptions help to justify Western military and economic hegemony across the postcolonial world (Abu-Lughod 2002). Writing about the War on Terror and American discourse concerning women in Afghanistan, Abu-Lughod asks, “Do Muslim women really need saving?” in order to show us how the language of “liberating” the “Other” dangerously locates oppression within religion and culture, rather than questioning historical and political forces responsible for contemporary circumstances of suffering (2002: 784). As the Western gaze insists on locating oppression within Islamic culture, the superiority of the West and the legitimacy of its imperial endeavors are once again justified. Thus:

When you save someone, you imply you are saving her from something. You are also saving her to something… What violences are entailed in this transformation and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her…? (Abu-Lughod 2002: 788–9)

According to the Bedouin women, the nature of funding agendas in the Naqab parallels the American relationship with women in Afghanistan. Both narratives are those of a superior culture (whose values are assumed to be universal): Saving women from an inferior culture; refusing to situate oppression within political, historical, or economic spheres; and instead locating it within a caricatured image of “Muslim culture.”

The Bedouin women quoted in this study highlight the “violences entailed in saving to.” One of the most ambiguous of these is the ways in which “women’s empowerment” programs can dislocate women from their communities. As Ula, an activist in her late twenties who lives in Rahat, reflects, “they empower women, educate them, teach them how to speak up, and her situation becomes much better; but her family, her community does not understand her, and she no longer knows where she stands.” For Ula, donor agendas in the Naqab are saving women to their own perceptions of womanhood, freedom, and justice by promoting an individualized notion of empowerment at the expense of collective struggles. As Ula suggests, the notion of individual empowerment – if done with uncritical conceptions of cultural oppression – misreads the politics of colonized women and works to decontextualize their struggles. Indeed, as Abu-Lughod (2002) suggests, the emphasis on individual empowerment of the “oppressed Third World
woman” is quite often a fundamental element of colonialism’s contemporary logic and practice.

Mohanty (1988) and Cynthia Wood (2001) argue that Third World development discourse has created an “average third world woman,” a passive victim and object of development, a designation similar to the sense that the Bedouin women often garnered from their interactions with donors. Women as objects of development therefore serve as justifications to perpetuate Western colonial logics, and this justification “recodes imperialism’s ‘civilizing mission’” (Wood 2001: 441). This continuity of colonial practice maintains the position of the Western world “as the primary referent in theory and praxis” (Mohanty 1988: 62). In the context of the Naqab, it serves to centralize Jewish Israeli society as the model of modernity to which Bedouin people ought to conform. The oppression of the “average third world woman” represented in gender and development discourse is also presented as “outside of history” (Mohanty 1988), which decontextualizes the function and role of colonization in the oppression of Palestinian Bedouin women.

Salma, the director of a women’s organization that aims to empower Bedouin women in Laqiye village, describes her experience of decontextualization:

A year ago, one of the foreign groups – a potential funder – that we usually host, visited our organization; usually I meet the groups from overseas to describe and explain the life of Bedouin in the Naqab, sometimes the group was joined by a Jewish guide. During one of these visits, the guide asked me in front of them all, to tell my personal story, and share details from my life; and I did. Following this meeting, the guide recommended to our director [that we] stop talking about the Naqab and the difficulties facing Bedouin communities and Bedouin women, and concentrate [instead] on personal stories. It was very hard and I felt very bad, because I am not asking for their sympathy. I want them to believe in my cause.

Salma alludes to the colonizing nature of such personalizing interventions, where questioning and invading women’s private lives has become normalized and is even seen as a means to “help” these women. From Salma, we hear that donors “asked [her] to leave the Naqab alone and tell them [her] personal story.” The focus on culturalizing and personalizing the suffering of the Bedouin women and the desire to know more about and invade their private lives often conflicts with what the women themselves want to prioritize. In this way, the women’s position as Palestinian Bedouin is what compels intervention, but only insofar as the women maintain the donors’ place as “primary referent,” referring back to using the Jewish Israeli society as the model to which Bedouin people should conform (Abu-Lughod
As colonized women are made into objects of benevolence, donors’ voyeuristic curiosity regarding the private lives of these women becomes an inherent part of the funding economy in the Naqab. The exhibit has always been part of colonialism’s scope.

The women reported that funding in the Naqab is mediated through local NGOs whose agendas are increasingly controlled by donors. The disconnect and disparity between donors’ agendas and the local lived experience of women is articulated by Islah Jad, who writes that NGOs are increasingly seen as “donor-driven” and “reflecting a Western agenda” (2007: 623). In the type of voyeuristic, decontextualized interaction experienced by Salma, Bedouin women become objects who suffer rather than subjects with agency to create change. As Manal, a 35-year-old Bedouin woman working for a Bedouin women’s organization, comments, “The funders are suffocating the organizations. The question is, do we have the power to face them, can we survive if we don’t please them?” This relationship, between donors and women living in unrecognized villages, is marked by distance, a lack of trust, and a severe power disparity. Fatmeh, a young feminist activist working for the same organization, made clear the limits of activism and resistance because of donor power over NGOs: “They want you to become better and develop to a certain limit, till you start becoming a threat to them, then you are not allowed to speak up.” What, or whom, could this “speaking up” threaten?

Requiring Bedouin women to share their private pains in the public sphere of funding works to re-center the role of donors and thus reinforces the starkly disparate relations of power that characterize the Naqab. Bedouin culture is more often than not portrayed as inferior and backwards. Donor relationships can become a transaction in which they “steal the pains of others,” which, as Sherene H. Razack suggests (2007), institutionalizes conceptions of Western superiority. Razack takes the example of the Rwandan genocide and the ways in which it was presented to the Canadian public. She contends, traumatic stories of Canadian peacekeepers, served pervasive narratives of white superiority and heroism “through images of black suffering” (2007: 379). Tracing this narrative’s historical circumstance, where the white narrative is positioned above all others, Razack shows how the suffering of nonwhite bodies is consumed by a white audience in order to tell a story of white compassion and objectivity. Here, “whiteness” is normalized and black and brown bodies are Othered. This is how the “universalist standpoint” – a perspective wherein one can view and know, but where one is “not himself of the landscape” and therefore not responsible for the circumstances of suffering – comes into being (380). It is not surprising, then, that in the Naqab donor consumption of Bedouin women’s private lives hinders these donors’ capacity to engage with the wider political, social, and economic conditions that shape the women’s lives.
Manal’s comment – “can we survive if we don’t please them?” – raises an interesting point: how does the pain of the Bedouin women have the potential to become “pleasure” for donors? The other side of consuming others’ pain, Razack says, is “the good feeling we get from contemplating our humanity” (382). The value of pain, for those who witness it, is the authority it gives them to judge but not be responsible for the suffering itself: “From our position as witness, we help to mark out the terrain of what is good and what is evil” (381). Engaging in this witnessing may allow us to demarcate good and bad, but most problematically, it does not necessarily compel us to act. Bedouin women like Manal suggest that donors may (re)produce an economy of oppression and suffering where pain is a valued commodity. Apart from the obvious implications of such a commodification, the Bedouin women raised important questions concerning the possibilities of such a framework to empower women in their struggles.

As much as consuming the private pain of Bedouin women may facilitate a certain humanitarian image, it problematically locates their struggle in the sphere of Islamic and Arab culture represented through Orientalist sexualized and intimate spaces (Meyda Yegenoglu 1998). Emphasizing the individual pain and private spaces of Arab Bedouin women allows donors to feel as though they are intervening in “indigenous patriarchal domination” without ever having to confront its entanglement with Orientalism’s legacy; it allows for “saving the Third World woman” without the need to question one’s own participation in the systems and ideologies of oppression Bedouin women face. The women described how the donors’ desires to gaze into the homes of the Bedouin women, to inquire about their personal, individual stories of suffering, transform their private lives into public, transparent ones, while at the same time turn their public struggle into a private one. Zahra, a 23-year-old woman participating in a public forum, calls us to challenge the privatization and culturalization of women’s status and rights, demanding that power holders stop suffocating us, build schools, proper roads, open new work opportunities, and give us some space so as to be able to work on our internal issues... Israel keeps us busy in preventing our houses from being demolished, and families from being displaced. We will never develop, and we will be always frustrated.

She continues,

How do you turn the issue from a public issue to a private and individual issue? The issue of the Bedouin is not an issue of women and culture; it’s the issue of the Palestinians and the state, Bedouins as a community versus the state. [It is an issue of] the unrecognizability of the Bedouins and the state’s interest not to recognize them.
For unrecognized communities in the Naqab, the women’s voices point toward two complementary, and potentially paralyzing, logics. On the one side, the Bedouin must negotiate aggressive settler colonial policies of de-development, which are used as a method to hinder their sovereignty as an indigenous community. On the other side, the donors proclaim to challenge these structures by personalizing and culturalizing the context, hearing the private pains of the Bedouin and “empowering” individual women. These donors are, at the very least, missing the point and, at worst, willing contributors to an overall context of deliberate state neglect and dispossession. As Rina Sen Gupta argues (2003), part of development and the assertion of citizens’ rights is developing effective accountability of the state. By culturalizing rather than politicizing and individualizing rather than collectivizing, donors ignore the structural and state-led oppression directed toward Bedouin citizens. They shy away from dealing directly with historical injustice. The cultural replaces the political, and liberation replaces revolution. When funders focus on culture and “liberating” women from the cultural contexts that supposedly bind them, donors overlook what is clearly a far more complex structure of the state, using the claims of culture for their own gains and exploiting actual cultural differences (such as dress codes) by not paying them serious heed. Paradoxically, such a context may actually empower patriarchy in Bedouin communities, for women are positioned as passive objects and victims of their culture. “Our revolution,” argues Najat, a 23-year-old Bedouin feminist activist, is “against patriarchy. [Our] men sit at home and ‘allow you’ to work, but they still give orders. And the state gives them the card in their hands.” As Zahra puts it, “this is how they empower patriarchy… [by] leaving [us] no space to develop.”

CLOSING REMARKS

What goes on with us is beyond criminal. All the funding is geared toward Al-Araqib; and here I am, from Al-Araqib, we all became the center of attention to funders and activists, but our houses are still under attack, our lives are under the cameras, and funding or no funding… employment or no employment… we remain persona non grata. (Suhad, a young feminist activist from Al Araqib)

Suhad speaks directly to the Bedouin women’s critique of funding pain, whose voices demand that we take a closer look at the dual contexts of their oppression and resistance. As Suhad, Nuha, and the other women suggest, the failure to analyze political economy from the perspective of those who have been racialized, who have been made into “others” in a framework of culturalization and Orientalism, can work to entrench domination and oppression (Andrea Smith 2010; 2008). The women quoted throughout this study argue that the agendas of many funding organizations – namely the
emphasis on the patriarchal/cultural oppression that Bedouin women face – ignore the colonial realities shaping and policing their lives that maintain their status as unrecognized entities (see also Shalhoub-Kevorkian [2012]). Sourcing funding to better the lives of discriminated and oppressed Bedouin people by state settler colonial politics was an experience that resulted in pain for many of the women who were expected to hold their private lives up to the scrutiny of donors. Funding pain, they suggest, fails to look beyond donor desires and the state’s ideological underpinning and neglects Bedouin women’s own analyses of the political economy in which they live.

We have argued that colonial logics, along with culturalizing interpretations of oppression, have erased the political, legal, and historical modes of oppression that propel Bedouin women’s struggle against their unrecognized and colonized status inside the Israeli state. Bedouin women’s battles to challenge ahistoricity and apoliticization are constrained by Israeli policies and practices, on the one hand, and the funding agendas of many donor organizations on the other. Particularly for women living in unrecognized villages, the state’s refusal to recognize them as citizens with rights buttresses the enduring historical and continuing injustices of settler colonialism, spacio-cide, and racial and gendered Otherization. Donor desires to view the Bedouin women’s private pain as an exhibit and their concurrent inability to comprehend the interlocking effect of Bedouin women’s racial categorization feed into and preserve women’s unrecognized status. Women must “play the game” of funding, where they must navigate and make use of the culturalizing stereotypes that reduce them to the nameless and faceless “Third World women.” As Sana explained, “it is very hard to be in need of others… knocking on the doors of funders, sharing with them our stories… even my divorce story, to get some support for my village.”

Bedouin women seeking to develop their communities must negotiate these twin dynamics of state ideology and funding agenda politics. The question remains: what space is there for development in the Naqab when unrecognizability and oppression are culturalized and Orientalized, when Bedouin women are discursively transformed into singular “Third World women” positioned as objects of funding but rarely as subjects of change? Bedouin women’s political economic analyses suggest that without confronting the myth of “saving the (Muslim) Bedouin woman” and without resisting the politics of unrecognizability that perpetuate funding pain and (re)insert Bedouin women into colonial agendas and politics, endeavors to develop these communities will only be partial.

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NOTES

1 All personal information that would allow the identification of any person or person(s) described in the study has been removed.

2 A dunam equals 1,000 square meters.


REFERENCES


ARTICLES

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