



# Deriving Strength from Productive Capacity

## The Heroic Legacy of Bedouin Women in Palestine



By Diana  
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refuse to send them to school. As adults, when their homes and the shacks of their herds – their only source of livelihood – are demolished regularly, women are tasked with salvaging what can be salvaged from the rubble, rearranging their belongings, rebuilding their homes, healing the fears and emotions of their children, and supporting their husbands and the elderly.

Bedouin women are marginalized furthermore because they lack adequate representation in official Palestinian institutions. Moreover, Bedouin women live in a male-dominated society characterized by patriarchal attitudes, behaviors, and policies that restrict their freedom and prevent them from fulfilling, in many cases even voicing their needs in all aspects of life. Despite this, Bedouin women have proven that they are able to overcome dire circumstances and can move forward.

The aspirations, dreams, and concerns of Bedouin women in Palestine do not differ from those of women around the world. The Bedouin woman is

first and foremost a human being, distinguished because she descends from an ancient indigenous society with a well-known history and a unique culture. Her responsibilities start with pregnancy, childbirth, child raising, and housework and end with her caring for sheep, manufacturing milk products, marketing and selling them, and managing household expenses.

The Bedouin woman's program of daily chores is completely different from that of women living in a village or city. She wakes up in the early hours of dawn and stays awake until the late evening. First, she lights the wood fire and bakes fresh *shirak* bread that is eaten with a cup of tea or the dairy products that she also prepares. She then bids farewell to her husband and helps her children go to school or herd the sheep. Then she devotes herself to housework, the most difficult of which is caring for the livestock, especially in the winter months. She milks the sheep and goats and then cooks, receives guests, and carries out many other tasks that space does not allow us to mention here.

**B**edouin women in Palestine live under challenging conditions. Their environment is affected by years of drought, limiting their ability to feed their livestock. The Israeli occupation exacerbates this condition by severely limiting pastoral communities' freedom of movement, preventing Bedouins from living their traditional nomadic-herding lifestyle, and violating their right to education, among other rights. Many Bedouin women have lived through war and displacement, some have endured many wars and one displacement after another, and some Bedouin families in Area C are subject to a fourth displacement now. These conditions leave the greatest impact on women.\* During childhood, girls on their way to school are frequently harassed or intimidated by settlers, which forces some to withdraw from school or causes their parents to





However, the features of Bedouin life in Palestine have changed dramatically over recent decades. In the past, Bedouin women roamed freely throughout the surrounding areas and moved without restrictions in vast open spaces to graze livestock, collect firewood, or simply experience joy. In some places, communities were confined to villages that they shared with other Bedouin families. In the village of Arab al-Jahalin—Al Jabal, for example, located east of Abu Dis in the Al-Eizariya area, the State of Israel forcibly urbanized Bedouins on state land and limited their movement to small areas in the surrounding mountains to allow the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim to be established and expanded. Israel did not care about the privacy of these Bedouins in general, and the women in particular, nor did it show regard for their lifestyle or how they wanted to build their homes. Moreover, it did not strive to understand the dangers of forcing them to build their houses in close proximity and ignored the

fact that there are historical disputes or conflicts between these Bedouin families. The biggest losers were the women, as they were forced to give up their traditional freedom and instead had to confine themselves and their children to their homes to prevent their children or husbands from engaging in clashes with neighbors, which would lead to having to appear before the Bedouin courts. These women say that they now take side roads and largely refrain from walking on main streets because they feel uncomfortable in the midst of strangers, including non-Bedouin drivers, merchants, workers, or others.

The arduous tasks that they used to perform empowered them to feel capable of producing and giving, thus supporting their families economically and morally. Today, due to the limited space available and because they were forced to reduce the number of sheep and goats they can keep, women have been robbed of an important part of their productive capacity. Many of them are no longer needed to tend

to livestock and process the related products, thus, their income has decreased, in many cases dramatically. With the limited availability of aid, many Bedouin families are in danger of falling below the poverty line.

The woman who once was close to achieving equality with men has lost her status. In the past, she not only used to manufacture milk products and offer them for sale, she also used to run a kind of bank – without having to deposit money in regular banks – because she was the one who organized the family expenses. Elderly women, especially, played an important role in marketing and selling milk products, as they were trusted and allowed to go to the market where they carried out sales and deliveries. Also, because a Bedouin mother is responsible for finding a wife for her sons, she plays a role in helping them start their new lives as young couples, which includes managing their finances and preparing their new homes and the household requirements of their future

daughters-in-law. Even after marriage, the money that is earned is deposited most often with the mother, and the son comes to her to ask for what he wants. As a result, the family shares everything.

Two important factors, among many others, contribute to raising the status of women, especially young women. First, schools located near Bedouin communities, whether the Al-Tahadi schools built for pastoral communities by the Palestinian Authority or village schools nearby that Bedouin girls can attend, have a positive impact because they give easy and safe access to education, including secondary school. In the past, many families forced their girls to drop out before reaching the secondary level in cases when schools were far away. Schools that are close to home allow girls to gain knowledge and learn about their culture, which enables them to envision a different future and expand their ambitions. Significant percentages of Bedouin women thus have been enabled to complete their academic education.

The second factor is the Bedouin community's connection to infrastructure, especially to electricity and solar energy, which makes easier the arduous tasks they used to perform by hand, such as shaking the milk to make curds, washing laundry, or producing food products daily due to the lack of refrigerators. Connection to electricity also allows them to study at late hours. Women and children are busy working throughout the day, and when there was no light at night, Bedouin students could not prepare their lessons well, which caused embarrassment and kept them behind. Today, women can prepare their homework and study in the evening hours, even if only in dim light.

There are vivid examples of ambitious young Bedouin women who have completed their education. Unfortunately, not all of them find suitable jobs. Some women finish their academic education as teachers but cannot find jobs close to their communities, which is a problem because women are not allowed to travel far or move to remote villages. In such cases, women blame the Ministry of Education for not finding a solution that suits their situation and not honoring their customs, thus preventing them from obtaining jobs in their own communities.

Some young women have not given up. They continue to search for opportunities to move forward within the framework of the social conditions of their communities and the restrictions under which they live. A number of women are involved in small projects that generate job opportunities and make them equal partners. One example is the Wadi Abu Hindi community whose lands

are partly within the Abu Dis district and partly on the lands of Al-Sawahra village. Its young women, a large percentage of whom have finished their academic education, made several attempts to serve the community and simultaneously improve their economic conditions. One woman set up a canteen in the school and sold sweets and snacks, another sells supplies such as cleaning materials for the women of the community. Recently, they completed a training course in mosaic making, a craft that is in line with their culture. With the current market requirements, however, the project needs support and must be promoted to allow these women to deliver their work outside the community – without marketers and other intermediaries who might exploit their efforts.

In another example, women from Al-'Araa'rah community in Al-Kassarat area in the vicinity of Al-Khan Al-Ahmar set up a kindergarten to accommodate the community's children and create

job opportunities for the women of the community. And in the Al-'Araa'rah Al-Mihtwish community, also in Al-Khan Al-Ahmar, a group of women use discarded sheep wool that in the past was used to make carpets and hair houses (Bedouin tents) but is no longer used today. They decided to reuse the wool to make dolls and models that depict the Bedouin culture, such as camels and sheep that are then sold as beautiful gifts and presents.

In the Sea Surface community, overlooking Jericho, the women gather around a tent put up by the community's residents to receive tourists. They provide guides that offer tours through the wilderness of the Dead Sea and the surrounding areas. The program includes serving coffee, tea, and traditional Bedouin meals, and selling homemade products and handmade crafts. The women here dream big and their creativity knows no bounds, but they need support to transform their ideas into sustainable projects – rather than spend their valuable time on temporary, short-term projects that are more commonly supported by funders and that end when the external funding ends.

The Bedouin woman's status in society stems from her ability to prove herself and the extent of her influence in society and among the women of her community. If women are enabled to continue their production and can make a profit from their efforts, their confidence rises and the respect of their partners increases, as does their determination to continue their work and use their creativity and imagination to enhance their role as productive persons who serve their community. Under the current circumstances,

Bedouin women face many difficulties in achieving their dreams of independence and self-reliance.

Supporting Bedouin women encourages resilience and empowers them, allowing them, in turn, to empower those around them and to function as an equal partner in their families. The Palestinian authorities and all institutions concerned with empowering women must continue to address women's needs in ways that respect the specificity of their culture and way of life.

Article photos are courtesy of the author.

*Born and raised in Al-Tireh in northern Palestine, Diana Mardi Atari is proud to come from a family with Bedouin roots: the Arab Hweitat tribe who fled to Al-Tireh in 1948, coming from Al-Bassa region. Currently, Diana works as a field researcher at an organization that advocates for human rights in planning. Since 2012, she has worked closely for and with Bedouin and pastoralist communities, aiming to ensure that their voices, especially those of women, be heard to support positive change in the reality of Bedouin communities. This article is based on her encounters and interviews with the women in these communities.*

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\*Diana Mardi, Asmahan Simry, "The Effect of Forced Transfer on Bedouin Women," Birmkom, 2017, available at [https://birmkom.org/wp-content/uploads/The-effect-of-forced-transfer-on-Bedouin-women-Eng\\_DESIGN1.pdf](https://birmkom.org/wp-content/uploads/The-effect-of-forced-transfer-on-Bedouin-women-Eng_DESIGN1.pdf).