
The anti-violence project: Addressing gender-based violence against vulnerable members of the Bedouin community, Israel

➔ By Ma'an, The Forum for Arab Women's Organizations in the Negev, Beersheba, Israel



Topic area: Empowerment of Bedouin women with and without disabilities and prevention of violence against Bedouin girls and women with and without disabilities.

Background

Today, Arabs comprise approximately 20% of Israel's 6 million people. Within that 20%, approximately 3.5% or 190,000 people are Bedouin. Considered semi-nomadic people, Bedouins are located throughout Israel, with the highest concentration in the Negev, or the southern desert of Israel. Among Bedouins, their fertility rate is about 5.5% per year, which is one of the highest in the world.

Bedouins are citizens of Israel with full rights of citizenship. But in practice, great disparities exist between Bedouins and the rest of Israeli society, including among other Arab and Palestinian Israelis. In recent years, most Bedouins have moved away from their homes (tents) in the desert to live in towns that were established by the government. But many Bedouins continue to live in the dozens of villages throughout Southern Israel that

have no official status. These "unrecognized" villages have no roads, infrastructure, or public services. As a result, the vast majority of Bedouins live in extreme poverty.

They also continue to practice polygamy and consanguinity. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor's 2010 Country Report on Israel found that the Bedouin segment of the Arab population is "the most disadvantaged group within Israeli society".

Within the Bedouin population, Bedouin women face even greater discrimination as well as high levels of violence. Many Bedouin women live in dire conditions and face marginalization in all aspects of life within their own community and by the State of Israel. For example, once a woman's husband takes his second or third wife, as is common, the woman is further cut off from her own community, both financially and socially.

Bedouin girls and women with disabilities suffer additional discrimination and exclusion because of their disability. Although disability within the Bedouin community is typically caused by consanguinity, poor prenatal health or poverty, people with disabilities are still "shunned" and "feared". Bedouin girls with disabilities typically never marry and are often kept hidden for fear of stigmatizing the entire family, especially siblings of marrying age.

As citizens of Israel, Bedouins with disabilities are entitled to disability benefits in the amount of approximately \$1000/month. Disability benefits are based on a medical model, with the amount per person adjusted for the type and severity of disability. Few Bedouin women and girls with disabilities are able to avail themselves of benefits because either they can't leave their homes due to the rules set down by their fathers, husbands or sons or because they lack. Of those who can arrange to go to the local office to apply for benefits, they will continue to live in poverty because the cost of living in Israel is so high.

What happened?

Ma'an was founded to address discrimination faced by Bedouin women within their own as well as within Israeli society. It distinguishes itself among other Bedouin women's organizations by its firm stance against polygamy. Ma'an developed its anti-violence project to specifically address violence in its various forms.

The Ma'an anti-violence project has three main components:

- **The Women's Empowerment Groups/ Workshops:** These are groups for Bedouin women with and without disabilities, which take place regularly in the homes of Bedouin women, often in the "unrecognized villages". These groups provide support to women so they learn how to support each other, and to talk about their lives, including the violence which they experience.
- **Hotline:** The hotline started in 2012, and is staffed by 35 volunteers all of whom undergo intensive training. The volunteers refer the callers to local services or to Ma'an's two lawyers. Ma'an lawyers represent individual women and provide trainings to women in their villages. The lawyers help clients apply for government benefits, seek orders of protection to stop violence, or connect them to other Ma'an services, including temporary shelters. Prior to this project, no free legal aid for Bedouin women with or without disabilities was available, nor were there any organizations that assisted Bedouin women in their homes. Today, the lawyers from Ma'an go to the villages to meet with women in their homes, to instruct them about their rights to government benefits, as well as the right to a reduction in taxes and water and electricity bills for families with a person with a disability. In 2014, 12 women with disabilities and 13 mothers of children with disabilities contacted the hotline for assistance.
- **Groups for youth, students and young professionals:** Ma'an believes that in order to eliminate violence against girls

and women with and without disabilities, it must work to re-educate Bedouin youth, particularly young boys. Ma'an recently hired a young man who had previously worked with a deaf-blind theatre group, and who is currently studying to become certified a sign language interpreter at an Israeli university. He works with boys ages 12–14 to teach them how to show respect girls and women with and without disabilities and how to address issues of violence. This young man is now forming a youth club for Bedouin boys who are Deaf to help build their self-esteem and to provide them with an opportunity for socializing. There are also girls' groups, but to date no girls with disabilities have joined these groups.

What worked?

The anti-violence program was developed in 2012. By 2013, there were about 80 calls to the hotline, while in 2014 the number of callers increased to 114. Most women who call the hotline report that they heard about Ma'an after participating in one of Ma'an empowerment groups or workshops. To Ma'an, every call that comes into the hotline is viewed as a "success". According to the director of Ma'an, "that call can literally break the cycle of violence because it means that the woman has decided to reach out, to outside of her family, for assistance".

The most significant changes resulting from the anti-violence program are:

- Increase in the number of women participating in the empowerment groups/ workshops;
- Referrals from the Ministry of Social Welfare and other organizations to Ma'an for assistance for women with and without disabilities who are subjected to violence;
- Successful outcome of court cases on behalf of women with disabilities who were subjected to family violence; and
- Successful outcome of applications by girls and women with disabilities for government benefits.

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- Dissemination of Ma'an publications, including a booklet that describes their program and practices. Their materials provide guidance on disability and gender rights in traditional societies in a frank and honest manner, taking culturally sensitive issues into account, while including practical advice for developing human rights awareness to enhance equality for Bedouin women.

What changed?

Ma'an's record of appeals of denial of benefits for women with disabilities is impressive, winning 4 out of 5 of their recent cases. One divorce case, filed on grounds of domestic abuse, concerned the loss of residency status for a woman who had entered Israel, illegally. Ma'an won and now in Israel, women (often from Gaza) who gain residency status through their husbands will not lose their status if they separate or divorce due to abuse or violence. Within the past year, Ma'an also has been successful in including women with disabilities and mothers of children with disabilities in their workshops and other activities. Part of the reason for their success is the assistance of a board member, Miriam Alamour, a Bedouin woman, who had polio as a young girl, and who is helping Ma'an staff connect with a group for women with disabilities which she runs at a local community center. Ma'an's model of including women with disabilities into ongoing programs rather than developing separate programs or them is a valuable and empowering example of mainstreaming disability into a gender agenda. The challenge remains, however, for women and girls with disabilities to become more involved in the planning and implementation of such programs.

What did we learn?

Since Ma'an is so controversial within the Bedouin community due to its stance on polygamy, many Bedouin women are deterred or even prohibited by members of their own families from contacting Ma'an for assistance. Ma'an's reputation for speaking out against polygamy also makes it difficult for the organization to find the volunteers needed to staff the hotline and to participate in the women's empowerment groups, and other activities.

Ma'an brings together women, most of whom routinely experience violence, but by their own admission, it is difficult to talk for them to talk about violence, even one on one. Perhaps additional specialized training for Ma'an staff on how to support women in sharing information about violence in order to develop strategies to facilitate a more open discussion with victims of violence would be helpful. Additional funding to enable Ma'an to hire staff rather than rely on volunteers also would have a great impact on the effectiveness of the organization.

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