

# When Bedouin Women Strengthen the Resilience of Their Communities

By Sahar Alkawasmeh



**T**here have been times when we did not manage to reach the medical center on time. There was no local medical center. Some people died, others gave birth on the way. Now we have Hamida Medical Centre, which is very close to us, and we can reach it easily in case of emergencies."

As Bedouin communities struggle to keep up with their traditional nomadic lifestyle and overcome restrictions on their ability to move across lands, it takes the efforts of all the community members to maintain economic and community survival. In this context, Bedouin women play a pivotal role. Traditional caregivers in families, often the last barrier maintaining an appearance of normalcy in the confinement of their home, they are the first to witness the impact of the deterioration of their surroundings on the members of the community and the diversity of their needs. However, engaging women to address the issues faced by their community might at times clash with their perceived gender roles, customs, and traditions and result in increased social tensions.

At Roles for Social Change Association (ADWAR RSA), our first engagement in support of Bedouin women in the areas of Khashm Al Daraj, Umm Al Khair, Al Najada, and Al Zweideen specifically reflected this fundamental problem. "Women and men working together is against our traditions and sharia. Our women are housewives, and they take care of the children." These were some of the arguments presented by religious

leaders, politicians, and influential men, preventing any communication with the young men and women we were trying to engage with. We were perceived as pushing a foreign agenda, and people called on values, customs and traditions, presenting them as a barrier to any change, be it good or bad.

However, what looked like an insurmountable obstacle turned in fact into a golden opportunity for social and community change. Getting these religious leaders, politicians, and other influencers on board was our first priority. As we held public meetings with those who were directly opposing us, arguments cracked and perceptions started to change. They saw common values and understood that our inclusive approach aimed to benefit the community as a whole, and not simply one specific group at the expense of another. Reflecting this newly gained trust and confidence, the Bedouin Council asked us to engage with clergy and politicians and to help unfold the deprivation faced by Bedouins resulting from the occupation policies and its everyday realities.

Mobility restrictions, rare authorization granted by Occupation authorities for the construction of infrastructures, and





Photo courtesy of ADWAR.

the difficult access of the Palestinian Authority to these areas, have indeed left Bedouins in a dire situation, which affects all aspects of their life.

"We are not even allowed to have licenses for our cars," explained one of the residents, "but the Israelis confiscate unlicensed cars. Once someone from our community was sick and we couldn't reach the main road. Policy makers must provide us with the means to drive our women and children or provide public transportation to the area." For this man, as for the Bedouin councils, however difficult it could be, the Palestinian Authority still had a responsibility to make services available.

As we engaged with Palestinian decision-makers to hold them accountable, we gained the trust of

the Bedouin local councils, which started endorsing our projects. This was a turning point that has enabled us to truly engage Bedouin women in the changes we wanted to achieve.

We started working with women and men in the Bedouin communities in order to help them to better understand existing gender issues and uncover the link between occupation, a decrease in health services, and an increase in family and social violence. When we worked with the Bedouin women, aiming to give them the tools to identify their needs and to advocate and lobby the decision-makers directly, the first-priority action identified by these women was the paving of the roads. This issue, which had been raised previously by the local council as a critical problem, appeared to be an even more significant

issue for women.

"We want roads that can lead us to Yatta, and also to the local school. Girls here can't go to school because it's so far away, and the roads are a disaster, they are unpaved," explained one of the women participants, while another added, "Because of the unpaved roads, we always stay home and do nothing. If we want to go out, we have to walk for a very long distance, or we need to wait for ages until someone can pick us up." Bedouin women suffered not only from the consequences of the lack of access to the community but also from social isolation. Women were being confined to their homes not merely due to social customs but also to lack of physical access.

*"Those responsible, including the local councils, should help the Bedouins and build a new clinic or a hospital nearby. The way things are now, if a child's allergies act up, he has to take a car to go to Yatta. Bedouins need to have a hospital nearby." (Bedouin woman)*

Paved roads were not the only priority. Bedouin women, newly empowered and confident of their rights and

the legitimacy of their demands, successfully began to lobby and advocate for the re-opening of their health center and for additional classrooms for girls. This was a revolution. Not only were concrete changes brought to the community, but also, for the first time, women were publicly driving these changes.

*"We don't want to hear you just talking and saying things. We want to see actions. We want you to provide us with the services that we need. We are struggling every day because of the Israeli settlements surrounding us, and you, as the Palestinian Authority, are responsible for responding to our needs." (Bedouin woman)*

Never before had Bedouin women met with decision-makers, and their ability to secure the commitment of the ministries of local government, women's affairs, education, and health in investing and re-establishing services in these areas was a collective success for the community.

Subsequently, through intensive lobbying, young men and women of the community were able to ensure that those promises were not merely hollow promises. The Hamida Health Clinic was re-opened and staffed by the Palestinian Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Local Government paved the road in the Khashm Al Daraj Bedouin community, and the Ministry of Education started to build new classrooms in the Al Hathaleen mixed school. This had a particular impact on the girls in these communities. "Male students are given priority to attend school and continue their education. Due to the lack of classrooms and the impossibility of merging and mixing as males and females together, the girls were unable to continue their education or engage in extracurricular activities in the past." While paved roads facilitate the attendance of young girls at school by limiting access issues due to weather conditions or bad maintenance, additional classrooms



Photo courtesy of ADWAR.

also ensure that girls are not dropping out of school anymore because of coeducational issues, for example.

Not stopping at this achievement, ADWAR continues to support the participation of Bedouin women in the development of their community. Following the revision of the composition of the local councils by the Palestinian cabinet this January, the Bedouin communities nominated at first only men to the positions. While some local councils refused in the beginning the representation of Bedouin women based on the community's culture, the interdiction of mixing men and women, and the lack of qualified women, others, with the help of community leaders took a public stance to support their participation. As we informed women of both the cabinet's decision and the nomination of men only, Bedouin women nominated strong and qualified women candidates and successfully lobbied for their representation, with nine women representatives appointed to the four local councils.

The time when the women of these communities were prevented from leaving their homes or forming a group seems distant now. Still, the withdrawal of two of the nominated women in one local council in February, due to family pressure, reminds us that this is not a linear process, and that these changes have happened only over the last three years.

The progressive acceptance of Bedouin women in the public sphere and allowing them to have a say in the

development of their community constitute a major achievement. This teaches us an important lesson with regard to women's empowerment: Women's empowerment is nothing less than the empowerment of the community. This has been a testimony of how the resilience of women, so often praised in the private sphere, can also translate and contribute to building community solutions.

Contrary to the perceptions of some, empowering the women of the community was not about supporting one group against another, nor did it serve only part of the community. With increased confidence, these Bedouin women were sure of their capacity to participate in the development of their communities and to advance actual change in their communities. Change in the discourse of the Bedouin men of these communities, the confidence and ability of Bedouin women to voice their needs and demands, and the improvement of the relations between men and women were further benefits and indicate the fundamental importance of collective action and support for members of these communities to play a positive role in society, be they men or women.

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