

Crossing Community Boundaries: Bedouin Women in the ‘Good Neighbors’ Project in the Negev/Naqab, Israel

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This article traces processes of building familiarity between Bedouin and Jewish women in the Negev/Naqab and their implications on various spatial-socio-political scales, using Jewish and Bedouin women in a Good Neighbors group as a case study. This good neighborliness occurs in a colonial framework that does not recognize the Bedouins’ legitimate right to their villages and lands, rather considering them non-citizens. Focusing on Bedouin women, this study identifies and exposes barriers, failures and successes when women from Tal Arād cross physical, cultural social and political boundaries. We interrogate the kinds of boundaries they cross, how this process takes place, and at what intensity. Moreover, we ask what their participation in the process of building inter-community familiarity means for their gender status within the tribal community. The methodology used emerges from a post-abysal perspective within the framework of a critical approach using qualitative methodology. The sources utilized were in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight Bedouin women in the group; examples of group activities and discourse and their consequences; and analysis of the observations made of the participants. The findings indicate that the process of crossing boundaries and building familiarity from below, which contributes to good neighborly relations, underpins the establishment of trust and the growth of a joint social platform on a limited scale. Long-term potential for establishing a different discourse and developing a healthy society in the Negev is inherent in expanding the circle of Good Neighbors groups.

Keywords: Recognition from below; familiarity; crossing boundaries; good neighborliness; post-abysal perspective

INTRODUCTION

Differences between cultures and their historic boundaries and interactions have received much scholarly attention. In contrast, the *nature* of the boundaries between

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ethnic groups and their constitution within the same space have not been sufficiently studied. In general, analysis of interactional and organizational features of inter-ethnic active and proactive relationships has paid little attention to problems of conduct around boundaries, and even less to inter-group cultural boundary crossing. Although such crossing generates inter-group familiarity, only a few studies (e.g. Svirsky, 2002; Nagda, 2006) deal with processes of familiarity from below and their implications for crossing physical, cultural and even political boundaries between neighboring cultural groups.

This is particularly true regarding minority ethnic groups situated in national political and geopolitical conflict with a hegemonic majority, accompanied by considerable mutual animosity. It is even more relevant when the gender perspectives of such relationships, especially a women's perspective, is largely absent in prior research. The perspective of women is particularly acute when internal gender relations within each group do not mirror each other, all the more so when the persistent ethnic domination by the external hegemonic group is compounded by the ethnic minority's non-egalitarian internal gender relations, meaning that women are subject to further weakening and discrimination. Under such circumstances mutual processes of crossing cultural boundaries by members of both sides, particularly by women, become highly complex.

This research project is intended to partially fill these multiple research lacunae, and the current article focuses on Bedouin women. For various reasons, which will be outlined below, crossing these boundaries is far more difficult and complex for them than for their Jewish partners, especially as it was not their own initiative, making a thorough discussion of both groups too complex for a single article. Below, we try to define and understand the nature of boundaries that are being crossed, how they are crossed and the intensity of this process by familiarity is developed, and what the implications are for their status as women and pioneers in their tribal community.

The complexity inherent in this process is compounded by the lack of interest by state authorities, for various political or ideological reasons, in fostering and supporting such intercultural processes despite grassroot indications of their desirability. The void created might be partially filled by civil society agents, who are often positioned within a socioeconomic, political and cultural structure that facilitates both strengthening of the civic status of the minority group and contributing to fruitful bilateral relationships. This, as Nagda (2006) and Svirsky (2002) argued, can be attained by promoting dialogical relationships between neighboring ethnic and majority groups.

Because the state does not recognize and legitimize some of the Bedouin villages, the process initiated by the Jewish group fills voids by building recognition from below. Some of the activities remedy deficiencies and overcome barriers that the State imposes on Bedouin citizenship, while others generate interactions that have important symbolic value. Serving as an intermediary, the group can, at times, compel the state into partial recognition by utilizing cracks in its hegemonic world view as revealed in a study by Dekel (2018).

These conditions are very typical of the relationships between the Indigenous Bedouin minority group and the Jewish majority in the Negev/Naqab region in southern Israel. On the surface, the daily lives of Jewish and Bedouin inhabitants are intertwined. The Bedouin are highly visible in Jewish cities, whether in commercial relationships or cafes, and at various government public service centers and workplaces. However, this situation is spatially unilateral, because Jewish inhabitants rarely frequent Bedouin localities. At deeper layers of this joint space, even fewer Jews cross the cultural and geo-political boundaries to form neighborly relationships with the adjacent Bedouin communities, let alone familiarity with their lifestyle and conditions.

Given this background several Jewish-Bedouin Good Neighbors groups have emerged in the last decade. These groups are based on a local connection between a Jewish locality and a neighboring Bedouin community. Their operation is determined by ideas, member preferences and needs arising from below. Therefore, each group has a distinct character, but they all share the same goal: establishing active and sustainable neighborly relationships within the shared space. Together, the groups form the Good Neighbors Network, which produces social capital through a multiplicity of connections within it, takes advantage of the economies of scale, mutual learning and assistance facilitated by the accumulated knowledge and experience in the increasingly dense network. The groups' formative "boundary crossing" is a reciprocal process that has been developing gradually over an extended period.

While engagement in such groups is a welcome idea for Jewish women, whose lives are conducted within a free and liberal Western society, the situation is very different among the Bedouin women. This is a consequence of several, hierarchically-ordered, factors, ranging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the typical state-colonial refusal to accept Bedouin claims for land and the ensuing state refusal to recognize many Bedouin villages, and severe structural discrimination in allocation of public resources. Bedouin women, in particular, are positioned at the bottom of the ladder for resource allocations, both externally but most notably internally within the tribal-patriarchal structure of their society. As doubly-discriminated Israeli Arab-Palestinians, the agreement of several Bedouin women to participate in these Good Neighbors groups drew our attention. While these groups bring together Jewish and Bedouin individuals, in this article we are concerned only with these Bedouin women for whom this move is far from self-evident. Within a general atmosphere of mutual national and geo-political animosity, we are interested in understanding their motives for crossing the cultural boundary and participating in this civil society project, their conduct during the encounter, and the personal and communal social costs and benefits for them within Bedouin society.

In what follows, the theoretical section will introduce the concepts of familiarity and citizenship in mutual relationships that construct activities of this type from below through a reciprocal, boundary-crossing relationship from a post-abysal

perspective. The methodology section outlines our research design for the interviews with Bedouin women participants in one such group. The empirical chapter will briefly describe the national-ethnic situation in the Negev/Naqab within the framework of Israeli policy toward this region and towards the Bedouin in particular. Examination of the case study will begin with a description of the Good Neighbors Network and Bedouin women's status within Bedouin community. The main section will focus on the Good Women-Neighbors group of women from Tal 'Arād and Arad from the perspective of Bedouin women who cross this cultural boundary. The final section will discuss and conclude the article in terms of insights about crossing community boundaries drawn from this case study and issues for future research.

CROSSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical and empirical discussion in this article concerns cultural, geographic and geo-political differences. These are inherent in crossing cultural boundaries and creating familiarity between neighboring women of an ethnic Indigenous minority group and a hegemonic majority group within the context of colonial state policy in an ethnic frontier. Within this complex context, the paucity of previous research and knowledge regarding the Indigenous women's perspective is quite noticeable.

Colonial Ethnic Frontier

Settlement colonialism is more than a struggle for resources: it is a form of dwelling, in which building a home for settlers involves depriving Indigenous people of their homes and displacing them (Baumel, 2010; Yiftachel, 2020). In a colonial setting, language assimilates components of oppression, turning dialogue into a monologue. Language, in this case, does not serve the needs of mutual communication but rather the needs of the authorities to reign (McKee, 2015). There is no real communication and dialogue between the oppressed and the oppressor. Physical space is also divided between the oppressors and the oppressed. The dichotomy between them prevents a dialectical relationship of mediation. As argued by Fanon (2007), the colonial condition does not allow the dialectics of self-recognition to exist.

In a marginal space, which is simultaneously supervised and neglected, civil society groups work to fill the void forsaken by the state (Dekel, 2018). Non-governmental organizations can also influence governmental decision-making and are supported both by institutional agencies and those who oppose the existing policy, who strive to achieve alternative goals and change the discourse in this space. To this end, they often demand recognition in the name of those who lack it. Cooperative efforts can leverage mobilization in the struggle (Armstrong, 1998; Mikhelidze and Pirozzi, 2008). The empirical analysis below will consider the process that builds recognition from below; however, in the current theoretical context, we prefer the concept of familiarity that is acquired by crossing boundaries to that of recognition.

Familiarity and Crossing Cultural Boundary

This article adopts the perspective of Svirsky (2002), who proposes shifting from the politics of recognition paradigm to one concerned with a politics of familiarity. The former relies on the Western, liberal point-of-view that leaves the space between cultures empty of any activity. In contrast, recognition from below and boundary crossing create a dialogical, intercultural space that requires an ongoing process as a political and ethical platform. This is accomplished by highlighting commonalities between communities and reducing the weight of ethnic difference, while stressing the advantage of cultural diversity. This type of process blurs the sense that there is a boundary between identities and frees participants in the group to create a common civic platform, different from and opposing that of the state, even challenging it with a search for new, extra-hegemonic language and discourse.

Svirsky (2002) also claims that the politics of familiarity is constructed by integrating three features: anti-hegemonic consciousness, modularity and continuity. Thus, it is necessary to consider three aspects: 1. Developing anti-hegemonic discourse while avoiding asymmetrical discourse, thus creating consistent patterns of communications; 2. Encounters without separation and sectorization, transition to belongingness, weakening the motivations for polarization and increasing reciprocity; 3. Continuity and continuousness. The joint process, Svirsky claimed, leads to reformulating the normative core, beyond the boundaries of inclusion-exclusion, to reducing the exclusive weight of ethnic affiliation, and to sharpening cooperative activity among members of the various communities. These goals, when achieved, nurture civic capacity as an alternative, a bottom-up civil discourse, which confronts the hegemonic discourse that denies equal recognition and citizenship.

Similarly, Nagda's (2006) research, which focuses on pedagogical processes, highlights four foundations for building barrier-breaking dialogue and communications: appreciation of difference, self-engagement, critical self-reflection and alliance building. The combined influence of these factors makes it possible to mediate difference. Dialogue and self-reflection are the most important factors. Dialogue creates relational symmetry while self-reflection forms cognitive symmetry in terms of equality, distributive justice or difference, and requires openness to studying the other. Nagda further argues that in order to deepen partnership and friendship, and lead intergroup cooperation, it is essential to nurture responsibility and empowerment, which can neutralize alienation, build solidarity with the other and seek a way in which marginality can serve the ethnic group as a source of opposition to its non-recognition (Nagda, 2006). In other words, as shown by Meir (1999), marginality can become a civic empowerment alternative to formal non-recognition by the authorities.

From a gender perspective, the strategies of non-indigenous feminists may enact new forms of struggle with colonizing practices. For example, among Aboriginal women in Australia, gendered activity may be understood through sex-role stereotypes imported from non-indigenous societies and applied repeatedly to these

groups. The process of colonization, which subordinated Aboriginal women, has been a process of disempowerment that could be remedied through what Frederick (2010) calls “re-empowerment.”

The above notions of Svirsky (2002) and Nagda (2006) flow indirectly into the current trend that deals extensively with the concept of boundaries, the significance of multiplicity and blurriness, and integrates the view from the South-east with that from the North-west. Despite the binary nature of discourse in Israel, the current context, which considers a group that brings two different ethnic communities together, helps us avoid a binary view of human space.

Therefore, it is appropriate to consider the idea of post-abysal thinking proposed by de Sousa Santos (2007), which rejects abyssal thinking that excludes most of the world’s population by adhering to a modernist, Western perspective, spatial appropriation and neo-colonial violence. He argues that abyssal logic suspends and excludes space beyond these boundaries, thereby annulling the law and democracy on whose behalf it claims to act. He proposes a post-abysal approach that contains a multiplicity of times, spaces, durations, knowledges, and types of knowing (beliefs and ideas). The approach of Yiftachel (2020) is similar. He proposes applying a combination of South-eastern and North-western perspectives to space, precisely because their structures of power, society and space are different and organized around identity regimes. They place greater weight on the ethnic-national foundations, rather than neoliberalism, but they are not entirely free of a liberal perspective.

The Negev/Naqab is a human mosaic that warrants study from a post-abysal perspective, so as to expose the mechanisms and political environment that contradict the spirit of the local groups’ activity. The integration of perspectives and identities is of great importance in this framework, because the gaps between the two communities are large even though both live in a ‘Southern’ peripheral space” relative to Israel’s core. The groups’ desire to take a different path makes it possible to form connections that could potentially reduce the conflict between them, which otherwise negates partnership. The participants in partnerships like that examined here use the resources available to them, maneuvering and shifting between cultures, societies, and geographic and political spaces, fostering the kind of divided identity as common, for example, in border areas (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Thus, notwithstanding discourse on boundaries and spatial separation between cultures, the boundary itself may be impossible to delineate because the cultural contexts carry the image of sealed rooms. Rather, as noted by Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy (2013), we cannot delineate the boundaries between cultures unequivocally. Therefore, they should be perceived as undefined areas that penetrate one another, even if asymmetrically.

This article deals with physical-cultural crossing between Bedouin and Jewish spaces. In particular, a spotlight is shone on a joint group of Jewish women from Arad and Bedouin women from Tal ‘Arād. An effort is made to clarify, decipher and understand the processes of making recognition and familiarity in a good

neighborly relationship between two different societies. The physical and cognitive walk back and forth between the Bedouin village and the Jewish city, between the familiar “home space” and a “foreign space” in the “home” environment, strives to make it a familiar and integral part of the home landscape inhabited by neighbors and societies that share a common territory.

The above theoretical background demonstrates that familiarity between two different, unequal ethnic groups in a colonial setting, which is also subject to a bitter, and at times violent, geo-political contest requires complex boundary crossing. While the boundary is liminal and blurred, every aspect of the gap—cultural, physical and political—is huge. This theoretical infrastructure is only the first step in understanding this process, as we shall see in the following sections.

METHODOLOGY

The case study concerns a group of Bedouin women who have been participating in the Good Women-Neighbors group since 2018. The women are in their fifties, partly educated, and live in a traditional, unrecognized village. We present insights regarding material, symbolic, structural, and subjective issues of the participation process, which are analyzed using qualitative methods. The sources of information include semi-structured interviews with eight Bedouin women participants (out of a total of about 20), notes taken during conversations in the group and informal minutes of group sessions. The semi-structured interviews and conversations are used as qualitative materials to consider experience, meanings and the reality of participants’ experiences, in order to explore how they might be informed by discourses, assumptions or ideas which exist in wider society (Evans and Lewis, 2018). The interviews were conducted in Arabic during June-July 2022, at participants’ homes in Tal ‘Arād, by a female Bedouin college student who received instructions and guidance by the authors including a list of questions to be asked. Each interview lasted about two hours, was recorded, transcribed and translated into Hebrew, and analyzed by the authors. The analysis was thematic in nature, meaning that we searched for common themes emerging from the raw data that reflect the various experiences and emotions of the Bedouin women during their participation in the group. Although there are gaps between the condition of Bedouin women of different generations, whereby the younger generation has made considerable progress in gaining higher education and participation in the labor market (Alhuzail, 2018), the group studied here is defined as traditional, mostly uneducated with only a limited command of Hebrew.

As one of the authors is a Jewish participant in this group, the present study also uses the reflexive method. Reflexive methodology is not limited to the description and analysis of an activity, but also encompasses and emphasizes a normative dimension as participant. It further considers the idea that knowledge production

is intended to improve the situation of the local people and thus the general face of society. This approach emerges from understanding recognition as a dimension of practice that challenges the power of the state in shaping existing relationships. As noted above regarding civil action, social norms may emerge precisely from the position of those who lack institutional power. From this starting point, recognition is first claimed at the local level (Goloviznina, 2019; Knoblauch, 2021).

DISTANT NEIGHBORS: BOUNDARY-CROSSING AND BOTTOM-UP FAMILIARITY IN THE NEGEV

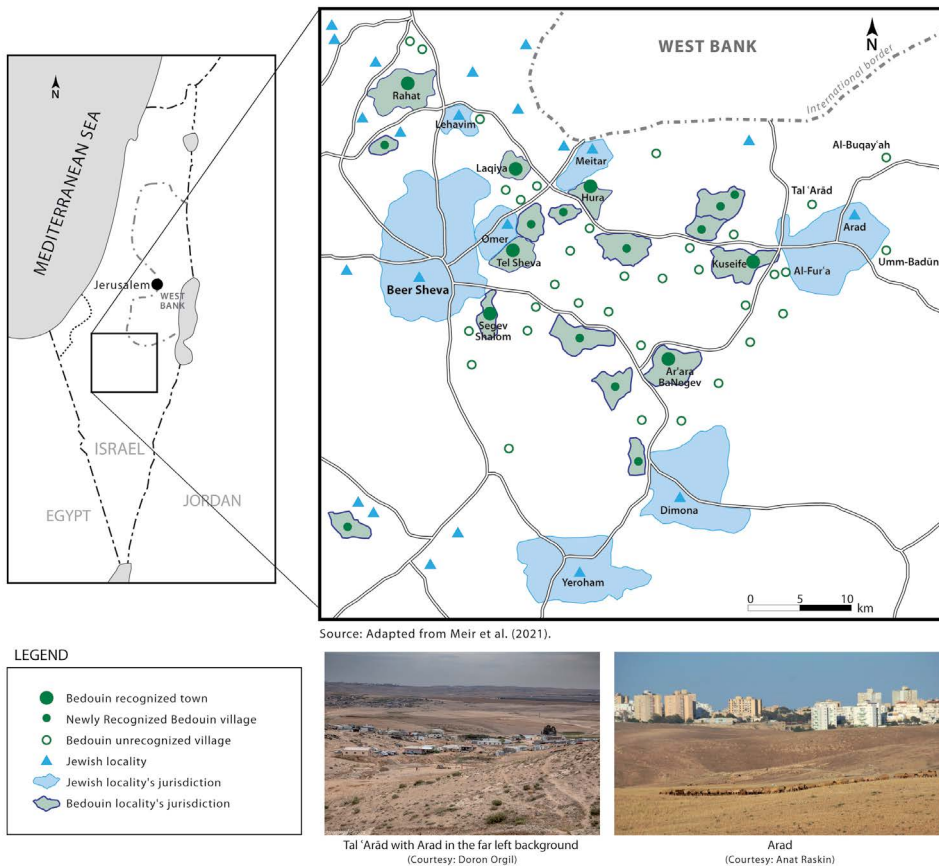
About 70,000 Bedouin (out of a total of ~300,000 Bedouin in the Negev/Naqab) live around the city of Arad. In the past, all Bedouin resided in the *sieg*, the bounded area into which many tribes were transferred after the 1948 war near other tribes who already lived in their historical territory there. Their communities are clearly visible from Arad, but only few of the latter's 30,000 Jewish residents ask why they live there, since when, why their dwellings look the way they do, and certainly not why nobody visits them. Moreover, the Bedouin of Tal 'Arād and other Bedouin localities around the city see Arad from the distance, because it is located on the higher hills in Arad Basin region (See Figure 1).

This area is part of an internal frontier region of Israel where the Bedouin are subject to a colonial regime of identities that condenses the minority group into an ever-shrinking space. The spatial, political and cultural divides and gaps cause tension-saturated dissonance and inter-ethnic conflicts (Yifrachel, 1996; 2020) such as during the Israeli-Hamas skirmish in Gaza Strip of May 2021. The discourse produced by a regime of this type labels the Bedouin communities as dangerous for Jews, so fear deters Jews from frequenting them. Nonetheless, the frontier is also inevitably an area of inter-cultural encounter and reciprocity (Meir and Zivan, 1999; Meir et al., 2020).

In many respects, Bedouin quality of life in the Negev/Naqab appears to have deteriorated over time. Due to an endless land tenure conflict with the state (Meir, 2009; Roded and Tzfadia, 2012; Tamir and Gonvotnik, 2017), about 40% have been living in localities that the government refuses to recognize and hence are target of considerable state violence. This includes evacuation orders, lawsuits and home demolitions, afforestation of land claimed by Bedouin, along with severe prevention and shortage of local public services and employment opportunities. Indeed, living conditions in Bedouin communities are far worse than those of the Jewish communities. As a whole, the Bedouin are impoverished and the gap between them and the Jewish community in the Negev is widening (Chioldelli & Tzfadia, 2016; Svirsky & Hasson, 2005).

Policies of neglectful control, segregation, repression, and displacement, together with refusal to recognize the Indigenous status and rights of Bedouin on their land

Figure 1: Jewish and Bedouin localities in the study area



and legalize the unrecognized communities, mean that many aspects of their life systems are conducted in a gray space. Violence erupts and spills over from the communities into the entire public sphere. The violence-saturated situation is the subject of much media attention, and consequently, the Jewish public views the Bedouin as a criminal society, squatting on state land and a threat to national security, which further increases alienation and heightens the “walls” between Bedouin and Jews. This obstructs efforts to expand cooperation at all levels and impedes developing recognition and familiarity from below by the local Jewish population.

In recent years, the state has relied heavily on a network of right-wing civil organizations that drive colonization processes in this area. This network has been recruiting, planning, executing, fund-raising, patrolling, supervising, investigating and reviewing all issues related to the Bedouin (Dekel, 2018). The messages transmitted by the authorities reflect stereotypical knowledge and repeat the same failed strategy time and again, without offering an alternative sustainable plan.

Bedouin Women

State policies towards the Bedouin affect Bedouin women's perspectives as they face multiple forms of discrimination, based on both their national and a tribal society affiliation. In addition, Bedouin women suffer further subjugation due to the inter- and intra-tribal relations that normalize endogamy to block marriages outside the extended family and tribe. Furthermore, they are excluded from all decision-making processes concerning their own family or personal status. The social value of marriage, in conjunction with the social legitimacy of polygamy, forces Bedouin women to become part of a polygamous family. Their lower social and economic status increases their dependence on their husbands, and negatively affects their ability to resist polygamous marriage (Abu-Rabia, 2017).

Another trap is the cross concepts of house as a physical structure, and home with its symbolic and human meanings. In the unrecognized villages that Israeli authorities regard as "illegal," the threat to the house and its vulnerability originate from outside, first and foremost from the potential that it will be physically demolished. House demolitions inflict severe personal and collective trauma, amplified by women's primary role as mothers. Paradoxically, the very same role also becomes a source of resilience and political resistance, as women act to defend a sense of home and restore family life in the face of state violence. Concurrently, the home, as the domain of the Bedouin woman, is threatened also by her husband. Polygamy often means that her husband neglects her, and denies support to her and her children. As shown by Gottlieb and Feder-Bubis (2014) and Handel (2019), it then becomes a place of alienation that fails to maintain the promised separation between the threatening outside and the safe inside.

Furthermore, as shown by Abu-Rabia (2017), Bedouin women's right to leave this marital system is curtailed by lack of separation between religion and state, and the exclusive jurisdiction of Sharia courts on family matters for Muslim citizens of Israel. This has an adverse effect on Bedouin women's citizenship and imposes restrictions on their legal freedoms. It demonstrates the confluence of interests between the preservation of oppressive patriarchal norms and Israeli control policies that stand at the root of their subordination. This situation is further exacerbated by the marginal legal status of Bedouin women in Israel, and by their exclusion from the Women's Equal Rights Law of 1951, which was never intended to provide them with legal protection (Abu-Rabia, 2017).

Within this grave situation, women seek internal emotional support. Within their extended family they are familiar with each other's situations and sorrows, and often retell and analyze each other's stories. Their internal encounters as a group, attended by relatives and close acquaintances, facilitate emotional support and allow their voices to be heard. Also, isolated from the labor market geographically, socially, politically and economically, Bedouin women turn inward to their own familial and communal groups as a safety net, as well as a means of addressing their status as poor people within their social and political reality (Abu-Lughod, 1985; Abu-Rabia-Queder et al., 2018).

The Good Neighbors Network

The group studied in this article is part of a wider project called Good Neighbors that aims to connect neighboring Bedouin and Jews. The project began with the founding of *Mirkam* (literally, “texture,” also “fabric”) in Yeruham in 2003. The *Keshet* (“rainbow”) group in Mitzpe Ramon began working with communities in the Negev Highland Regional Council in 2017, and a group in Arad and four neighboring Bedouin villages was established in 2018. These groups provided the basis for establishing the Good Neighbors Network in 2019. The Network is represented at the civil NGO of Headquarters for Equality and Justice in the Negev, together with representatives from a wide range of other civil organizations whose activities relate to improving quality of life in Bedouin society.

The network calls for cultivating shared citizenship and neighborly relations, based on the ideal of citizenship as a partnership between equals, while also highlighting the interdependence of Jews and Arabs in Israel. The informal written vision of the group in 2018 reveals the underlying assumption that increasing the participation and involvement of all population groups will help build a shared democratic and fair society. Within this ideal framework, sustainable frameworks and in-depth, inter-group familiarity have been created. They are based on a belief that the shared establishment and operation of activities from below will deepen familiarity and surface local knowledge that will eventually “trickle up” to the national level to change attitudes and policies towards the Negev/Naqab, in general, and towards Bedouin society in particular.

Arad (pop. ~30,000) is surrounded by four unrecognized Bedouin communities and the recognized town of Kseifa (total population ~35,000). Arad serves as a regional city and a center of commerce, employment and services, public transportation, playgrounds and sports facilities (all of which are absent in Bedouin communities). Due to house demolitions and housing shortages, young Bedouin couples have recently began renting apartments in Arad and other Jewish communities in the Negev. Within this reality, residents of Arad initiated the Good Neighbors group with residents of these four Bedouin communities: Tal ‘Arād, Al-Buqay ‘ah, Umm-Badūn and al-Fur ‘a (Figure 1).

The group strives to create interpersonal and inter-communal familiarity by constructing content and activities that develop awareness and understanding of partnership and interdependence. Learning processes are designed to increase understanding of the surrounding space through organized meetings with people who can contribute to expanding the group’s knowledge about Bedouin community. Furthermore, there is an ongoing learning process about ways to build partnership, cultivate listening and be attentive and self-reflective about patterns of thought and action.

The relationships within the group are kept flexible because of the changes and reversals inherent in real-life situations. The agenda and work process are reassessed frequently; modest, realistic goals are set with due consideration to available skills,

persons involved, time and budgetary constraints. Operating as part of the Good Neighbors Network, managed by the organization Future in the Desert (*Atid BaMidbar*) in Yeruham, facilitates learning from the experience of other groups, joining forces, and making their voice heard. In addition, the group considers as important contact with the local authorities.

Several examples of activities over the years are:

- Walking the Neighbors' Path (in the style of Jane's Walks): Building connections by visiting the village of al-Fur'a to expose the Jewish residents of Arad to the living conditions of their neighbors and promote understanding of their common interest in opposing plans for construction of a phosphate mine within the historic tribal territory.
- Assistance in meeting various needs, such as a school access road or a Hebrew course for women.
- A weekly bicycle riding group for boys from Tal 'Arād, and a monthly joint ride with a group from Arad. This activity was held for two years and then ended due to budgetary constraints.

Apparently, a skilled network of social capital has been created, which seeks to break through the barriers erected by the Israeli government. The developing relationships have generated an alternative language and discourse that differs from that common among the Jewish public and politicians. The latter practice remote views of Bedouin communities and adopt a discourse about them centered on crime, violence, disorder, struggle, poverty, dirt and pollution that in fact blames the subjects to whom they attribute a degenerative morality. This approach emerged from a longstanding colonial tradition in the European colonies; it legitimizes the destruction of homes and domestic facilities, purportedly for the sake of bringing order to the entire region (McKee, 2015).

Visiting Bedouin communities and establishing personal connections reveals that the logic dictating their internal spatial order is not a Western one but rather traditionalism. The weakness, poverty, and garbage stem from policies that refuse to provide the localities with any services, forcing residents to remedy the lack of infrastructure on their own. The state enforces this situation on the unrecognized Bedouin communities in order to force them to evacuate, and then frames this environmental failure as their fault.

THE GOOD WOMEN-NEIGHBORS GROUP IN TAL 'ARĀD AND ARAD

This political socio-cultural and environmental context may serve to frame this group of Bedouin and Jewish women of the Arad-Tal 'Arād region. The group was initiated by Jewish women who are members of the local Good Neighbors group when they realized that Bedouin women were absent. Understanding that their absence was related to the gender background in Bedouin society, as described

above, it was decided that the only way Bedouin women might join the project would be a women's only group.

The group consists of about 20 Bedouin and 20 Jewish women. Most of the Jewish participants from Arad are retired, highly-educated women, who volunteer frequently and participate in various public activities in the city. The Bedouin women are somewhat younger, and are part of four (out of ten) extended family groups living in the unrecognized settlement of Tal 'Arād. Bedouin unrecognized villages are more traditional and under-developed than Bedouin towns (which were established by the state in the 1970s), and their inhabitants are considerably less educated, with women mostly having only elementary or no education at all.

The initiatives and ideas for activities originate and are organized by both communities. Each group session allows time for mingling, group discussions on various topics and personal conversations, which strengthen the relationships and even lead to mutual, individual home visits. Most Bedouin members speak poor Hebrew, and few Jewish women speak Arabic. Therefore, an interpreter is often present for meetings. The group has become increasingly consolidated around shared events and recreational activities capable of facilitating enhanced familiarity. The meetings are held monthly (excluding lock-down periods and outbursts during Covid-19).

Examples of such activities include a presentation on Bedouin embroidery and a conversation about the violent events by Bedouin along the nearby Route 31 during the Israeli-Hamas hostilities in Gaza Strip in 2021. On another occasion, members worked together, wrapping threads around balloons for a sculpture displayed in Arad, while talking with the guest artist about safe places and spaces. Concurrent with group activities, the steering team, consisting of three Bedouin and three Jewish women, has been meeting to discuss previous activities and suitable plans.

Bedouin Women's Discourse on Good Women-Neighbors

To understand the process, barriers and implications of Bedouin women participating in the Good Women Neighbors group, the following questions were asked in the interviews with the participants: Why did Bedouin women join the group? What do these meetings feel like? How do the meetings affect them and their influence on other women in the village? What are the barriers and how are they being managed within the group? How is familiarity acquired and what does it take? What are its consequences and significance in terms of crossing a cultural boundary?

Joining the Group and Experiencing Meetings

Crossing the boundary by Bedouin women begins with the very moment of joining the group. This is a radical act for women who have never experienced such intensive social encounters outside of their extended family or community. It is a courageous step that may be labelled "activistic." Indeed, the first meeting is excitedly expressed: "Weird, good and beautiful feeling," "a feeling I can't describe. We are sitting together and hugging," "I felt special when I joined the group," "before

joining we thought – how the Jewish women will look at us? Will they accept us? What do they think of us?” (MR.N, 25 June 2022). Full of joy and expectations, they were apprehensive and wanted to change their stigma as backward.

The founder and leader of the Bedouin group of women described the first meeting as follows:

We sat and talked, and each member listened to the others telling their stories and what they have done in their lives, and we did understand each other.... I felt there is a good neighborliness between us, and in our joint meetings I felt something difficult to express, that we are engaged with the other culture, and they are like sisters, and we understand each other.... that meeting pushed me to further building of the group. (KE.N, 15 July 2022).

Neighborly relationships have begun to emerge over time: “It was a great change, as I came to know other people, whose life are much more progressive” (HE.N, 10 July 2022); “Since the very first day, I felt I love this encounter which enhances sense of security and love relegated by them. It pushed me to carry on with them, learn helpful things from them and they learn from us the Bedouin” (KE.N, 10 July 2022). Change seems to be the underlying motive among the Bedouin women: engagement with a different culture, changing negative stereotypes about the Bedouin, mutual benefit and learning from one another, progress and security.

Physical Crossing from Tal ‘Arād to Arad

As the Bedouin women interviewees attest, this is apparently the easiest boundary to cross. Accustomed to consuming public services there, they do not feel alien in Arad and are mostly happy for another way of visiting it: “I feel it is better to meet in Arad than in Tal ‘Arād because it is more reposeful for us.” (HA.R, 20 July 2022); “Over there in Arad you feel like you want to change things, move on with your life. Back home you are permanently stuck with the same thoughts and emotions over and over again” (ME.A, 25 July 2022); “I’m in Tal ‘Arād all the time, it gets boring” (HE.N, 10 July 2022). It is precisely the physical crossing to a place so different that is regarded positive and liberating, particularly as it is away from men’s surveilling gaze and familial intervention. Yet, in reality and for various reasons, only few of the Bedouin women group members participate in meetings set in Arad. The reasons usually relate to internal socio-cultural barriers, including multiple children to care for, difficulty leaving their husband at home after work hours, their husbands’ general opposition to these activities, the social ban on travelling in a car driven by someone outside of the family and returning home after sunset. Thus it seems that there is a considerable gap between the women’s will to participate and their ability to pursue it, which leads to the issue of freedom as a desire of the heart.

Cultural Crossing—The Gap between the Bedouin and Jewish Women

Obviously, the cultural boundary projects onto crossing the physical and political ones. Notable among the barriers for the Bedouin women is a denial of personal freedom of mobility and choice by men in their nuclear and extended family, which

exacts various social and emotional costs, compared to the freedom enjoyed by their Jewish peers: “Jewish women enjoy more freedom, can go anywhere and are more united. Bedouin women cannot leave their children alone or without their husbands’ consent for their very outing, and there are also religious and other traditional constraints” (HA.R, 25 July 2022). Another reason for avoiding participation in the group, more directly related to the cultural gap, is “There are very few educated Bedouin women... no opportunities for personal growth” (MR.N, 25 June 2022), “and there are those who despise progress or mingling outside their community altogether” (HE.N, 10 July 2022). Notably, educational inferiority is highly significant when weighing participation in the first place. Moreover, the Bedouin women do not reject their tradition. One of the group sessions included a discussion of “what is a secure place.” Many of them noted, “security derives from men – father, brothers and uncles in the extended family” (MI.N, 7 October 2021), all of which is part of Bedouin tradition. And yet, they wish for more personal freedom, growth and openness to the external world and less internal dependence and arbitrariness (as we will elaborate below).

They are also concerned about the impact of these barriers upon the joint activity of the group. On the one hand, “Bedouin women are very constrained in many areas which Jewish women are not; it bothers me most because we cannot do things together” (KE.N, 10 July 2022). On the other hand, they realize the potential to act beyond the cultural difference: “Each one is unique, and every human being has culture and religion, and you can’t force nobody to be like you” (MR.N, 25 June 2022); “There is no difference between us and them. They understand us and we understand them and each one has her own position” (HE.N, 10 July 2022); “We stepped forward, and there is no difference, we are the same” (ME.A, 25 July 2022). Thus, the group’s activity becomes legitimized and possible despite cultural differences.

Political Crossing

While the cultural boundaries originate from within the Bedouin community, the political boundary demarcated by the state is evident in daily life in the unrecognized village. Frequent home demolitions; the absence of physical infrastructure, public services, and public transportation; the poor education provided in transportable structures, and denial of the right to vote for local government and the absence of local polling places for national elections all remind the inhabitants of Tal ‘Arād that they are regarded as intruders and illegal squatters on state land, who are excluded from civic circles, and thus denied of many civil rights. The freedom of their Jewish neighbors is regarded as a privilege granted from above by the state, which denies them similar status, and therefore alienates them: “The Jews enjoy freedom, lots of rights, but the Arabs in Israel have been denied of many rights” (ME.N, 25 July 2022); “I do not feel that I belong to Israel” (MI.N, 26 June 2022); “I often feel I am not a citizen of Israel... I do not compare myself to the Jewish woman who has everything” (MR.N, 25 June 2022); “We are a minority, denied of many rights,” and yet, “despite of these we maintain contacts in our group” (HE.N, 25 July 2022).

The 2021 hostilities in Gaza Strip led to riots and vandalism among the Bedouin, including highway blockages around the Negev. These actions were directed towards the government but caused much affliction and inconvenience among the neighboring Jews. In this situation, “I felt much comfort and belongingness when we met and discussed the events” (Ml.N, 26 June 2022); “The Jewish women side with us, but we fear the events can separate us apart” (KE.N, 10 July 2022). Obviously, this private group generates a sense of security and belongingness which contrasts with their absence and fear in public space outside the village. In other words, the group has become a very local space of encapsulated connection dissociated from the national scale, with clear distinction between the informal but reassuring local recognition of Bedouin women and their village that the group provides, and its formal denial by the state. In this respect, the group is spatially and temporally removed from the contemporary context.

The Impact of Participation

Participation of the Bedouin women has an impact on the group as a whole, the Bedouin community and the individual participants. Within the group “The impact is positive for all of us” (Ml.N, 26 June 2022); “I’m very active in the sessions, the group listens to me and is happy about my views and understanding, many women talk and share. I feel the Jewish women pushed me forward to establish the group from our side” (KE.N, 10 July 2022); “We were surprised they thought of doing good things exclusively for us” (MR.N, 25 June 2022).

On the personal level there is a great craving to make progress through these encounters in conjunction with the need to express themselves personally and share pain and affliction: “We take from them whatever is positive to make progress. I often wanted as a Bedouin woman to be like them” (Ml.N, 26 June 2022); or:

Life is very compulsory for us and nothing can save us like they do. I have grown and now I enjoy more freedom which can help realize my aspirations. I feel we participate as an Arab group, and that we have to become smart. The activity is meant for us as a group to talk about what we miss, about our affliction (HE.N, 10 July 2022).

As a silenced gender, the Bedouin women find the shared space a convenient place to express their emotions for the first time. For example, one woman was able to voice the pain accompanying her since childhood because of the death of her father, and another spoke of her hurt when her husband took a second wife.

The impact of the group, they assert, is also responsible for change within Bedouin community. The participants feel empowered, less fearful and have acquired the ability to teach other women about exiting home; they feel stronger and leader-like among women, and thus produce an incentive for community development: “I learned how to express my thoughts without shame, to powerfully face everyone and thus help the community” (Ml.N, 26 June 2022); “I have many projects and am aware of many things now” (HE.N, 10 July 2022); “I can help community, help

Bedouin women who want to grow, to start projects that can help the needy. In my mind strong and progressive women can stand up to the community” (KE.N, 10 July 2022). This is very powerful, multi-path impact that sways between traditionality, self-esteem and desire for liberation and modernization.

Sense of healing is perhaps the most important expression of the products of the group. It is manifest, on the one hand, in mutual respect for cultural boundaries, and on the other hand, in mutual learning and persistent, candid relationships that build trust and tranquility, thereby breaking through the boundaries that divide them. As noted, because many women do not dare to cross the boundaries, it is precisely this act that defines the participants as groundbreaking activists. It also contains a silent, feminist component, which is manifest in overcoming barriers and blocks to participation, and the latent messages inherent in the conduct of their Jewish peers. The four years of the group’s ongoing activity demonstrates persistent resistance to Bedouin men, albeit very mild, and within the conventional, traditional frameworks. The group has also become another safe space for the Bedouin women, a timeout or escape from daily stress and burdens, an opportunity to express their frustration of their grave situation, in the presence of Jewish women who, they feel, witness their affliction by listening and sympathizing.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Building the infrastructure for familiarity within the Good Women-Neighbors group in the Naqab/Negev is conditioned by Bedouin women’s expression of a strong desire for it. Indeed, this is manifest in the group’s conduct and activity, from its joint management and continued review of group practices and awareness of the inherent processes on the one hand, to training the Jewish participants in Bedouin culture and public policy towards the Bedouin minority on the other hand. Using Svirski’s (2002) terminology, these factors ripen into familiarity and informal recognition of the unrecognized village of Tal ‘Arād granted from below by the Jewish women from the neighboring city of Arad. In the final analysis, they are very happy about the social setting within which this process occurs, and greatly appreciate this civil recognition despite its informal nature.

As is often the case (Nagda, 2006), the process is quite demanding. It is a courageous move and therefore involves multiple expectations. The Bedouin women face huge barriers, not only internally but also externally when encountering Jewish women in the group who are both foreign to them but also perceived as considerably “stronger” and more empowered. They view them as independent, educated, and open to change, which makes them role models for the further education they desire for themselves, which became a rather conspicuous theme in their discourse. By overcoming this barrier, they position themselves as ambitious, progressive and groundbreaking; from this perspective, they look down upon those women in their community who refuse to join the group.

Given the low self-esteem enforced upon them by the state and within their community, they feel that friendship and relationships in the group are respectful and egalitarian, and that the Jewish women listen to them as equals and appreciate their discourse, thus allowing them a place and voice of their own. Furthermore, they are more assured in accepting the group's assistance and support in various kinds of learning, training and exposure to the outside world, which all further re-empower them, using Fredrick's (2010) concept, as leaders who are strong inwardly, within their community.

We identified several boundaries that are crossed by the Bedouin women in achieving these gains. While the physical-spatial one of exiting the village to attend group sessions in the Jewish city is the easiest to cross, it still is hampered by various internal social difficulties. However, each exit is a positive move that is regarded a victorious event. Once within the Good Women-Neighbors group, the cultural boundary, while significant in terms of constraints imposed upon the Bedouin women's status within their community, is not a challenge. The cultural constraints are taken seriously by the group, which strives to avoid friction within itself and between the Bedouin women and their community. The group has deliberately positioned itself as a zone free of inter-cultural confrontation and maneuvers its activities accordingly. The most difficult boundary to cross is the political one. While the Bedouin women cannot overlook it, they insist on distinguishing between the alienated and perceived-insecure outside spaces, and the group which is a secure space for them, even during the hard times, like the Bedouin riots on Route 31 during the hostilities in Gaza Strip. While they feel "recognized" within the group, this secure, shared and recognizing space is not replicated outside the group.

In the final analysis, the Bedouin women who cross the boundaries maintain a low-profile and avoid public manifestations that could risk their participation in the group. Overt crossing takes place only within the group but on a very personal level, and much less so in the community and state arenas. This insight takes us back to the broader context within which this Good Women-Neighbors group takes place. The extra-group low-profile contrasted with a high profile within the group reflect the contextual layers discussed theoretically above: the condition of settlement colonialism within which the Indigenous group is situated; the internal settlement frontier within which both the Indigenous minority and their Jewish neighbors from the hegemonic majority are situated; the geopolitical circumstances which compel both sides to share this territorial space thereby turning it into a diversified cultural space; and the intra-Bedouin community patriarchy and male-hegemony which for Bedouin women is an internal "social frontier." Although state agencies refuse to formally recognize many of the localities of the Indigenous group, civil society agents undertake to remedy this unjust condition by forming a group that grants this place informal, unofficial civil recognition from below, through informal politics of familiarity. The process within the group includes appreciation of difference, self-engagement, critical self-reflection and alliance

building, re-empowering Bedouin women up from their disempowerment by the state. This politics, in turn, produces a common civil platform that integrates the view from the south-east with that from the north-west, creating a safe space for the Bedouin women. As a platform, it facilitates a symmetrical post-abysal discourse of belongingness and solidarity rather than an abyssal, asymmetrical, dichotomous discourse of alienation and estrangement.

Existing research on familiarity building has so far focused upon social fields of student groups (e.g. Sonn et al., 2000) or feminist groups (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2010). Our study is unique in that it explores this issue within a geographical context of neighboring communities in a shared space located within a peripheral region. Further research, beyond expanding the scope of analysis and comparison to groups that also engage Bedouin men, may take these insights in several directions. The first is gender politics within Bedouin society, where the major question to be asked is if the empowerment of Bedouin women, as achieved via this group, is sustainable within Bedouin community. The second is whether more educated and gainfully employed young Bedouin women share the view of this process of familiarity building with their older, non-educated and unemployed peers. The third direction is the practical arena: has this informal civil recognition from below infiltrated up to the formal state circles to become an engine in formal state recognition of this and other Bedouin localities?

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