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### Disablement, Gender And Deafhood Among The Negev Arab-Bedouin

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#### Abstract

*A high incidence of deafness occurs among the native Arab inhabitants of the Negev (the southern arid region of present-day Israel). Dynamics both within the Bedouin population, as well as Bedouin encounters with state services and the Israeli-Jewish deaf community, are leading to the gradual emergence of a new sense of Deafhood among the Negev Bedouin. This paper concerns the differential impact of these processes on deaf Bedouin women and men. The first aim of this paper is to consider the state of deaf people among the Negev Bedouin. The second is to provide an analysis of the intersection of deafness and gender, focusing on the way marriage and schooling inform the lives of deaf Bedouin women and men, and shape their different lived experience and structure of opportunities.*

**Keywords:** Arab-Bedouin, Deafhood, Gender, Marriage, Deaf education.

#### Introduction

The extent to which deaf people among the Negev Bedouin are disabled or isolated varies considerably. The following account of two exceptional young women and their reunion with an old classmate outlines some of the issues explored in this article.

Aziza and Kifah are the first of the very few deaf Bedouin women that are employed in a paid job. They are both in their early 30s and unmarried. Aziza works in the laundry department of an old-age home in Beersheba.

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Kifah was recruited when the first deaf class was opened at a local Arab school and became the first Bedouin deaf preschool teacher-assistant. Aziza and Kifah are old classmates; they both attended the deaf school in Beersheba. Nowadays, they exploit every opportunity for short meetings after work, before hurrying home where they are expected. They keep in touch by SMSs [text messaging], using the little Hebrew they learned at school.

When I told Aziza and Kifah that I had met their old classmate Amina, they started to devise a plan for us to visit her together. A month later, we set out to find Amina in a distant encampment that none of us had ever visited before. Amina was overjoyed, and they talked for hours before we had to hurry back. On our way back, Kifah and Aziza expressed great frustration with Amina's miserable state. She used to be so lively and witty, they said; now her signing was poor and "her heart turning sour." Her mother seemed to be the only one making an effort to sign to her. Yet her mother pitied her and repeatedly expressed her grief over Amina's deafness. "They don't know what to do with a deaf daughter," said Aziza. "If she was a boy, it would not be the same," said Kifah; "they are mourning her as if she was dead, how stupid." Kifah and Aziza, too, had their struggles to fight; "it is not easy to be an unmarried daughter" they confessed. But they had never imagined how miserable Amina was.

Aziza and Kifah's exceptional vocations are on par with a growing number of pioneering hearing young Bedouin women. Kifah obtained a driver's license and commutes daily to a nearby township. A driver's license is a much desired asset which only few Bedouin women possess. Before our visit to Amina, Kifah had told her parents she would be late because of a staff meeting at school. Venturing into unrelated Bedouin locations was not appreciated. Like many of her hearing sisters, she negotiates her mobility and independence based on the esteem associated with education. While Amina is the only deaf person in her community, Aziza and Kifah grew up surrounded by many deaf relatives and many of their hearing relatives are familiar with a locally developed sign language. Thus, some of the internal variation within the Bedouin deaf population may correspond to the community of origin. However, the obstacles met by Bedouin deaf women are not internal only; their restricted access to proper education presents them with further drawbacks.

This paper examines the intersection of deafness and gender among the Negev Bedouin. The analysis will focus on two factors of social life, namely marriage and schooling, and the way they inform the lives of deaf Bedouin women and men, and shape their different lived experience and structure of opportunities.

While most deaf Bedouin men are married to hearing women, the majority of deaf women remain unmarried. This factor underscores not only a clear disparity between deaf Bedouin women and men but also significant differences between various Negev-Bedouin communities. Only in one of these communities, the marriage rate of deaf women is similar to that of deaf men or hearing women. Recently, however, the first deaf-deaf marriage took place in the Negev, suggesting the emergence of a new sense of Deafhood.

The second factor shaping and amplifying gender differences, is schooling and the social resources it provides, in terms of language, vocational skills and social

networks. This demarcates a generational difference between those who have not received any formal schooling and those who have attended school. The dismal state of deaf education, and its failure to provide even most of this schooled generation with literacy, has created a new disparity between deaf and hearing. Additionally, it produced a disparity between the younger generations of deaf women and their cohorts of deaf men.

In the last two decades, a significant body of literature on the sociopolitical affiliations of deaf people has documented the celebration of deafness as a socio-cultural identity. The notion of linguistic communities of (deaf) signers is based on the key role of the cultural identification with, and preferred use of, a sign language, an identification not shared by all hearing-impaired people. Within Deaf studies, various manifestations of such deaf alliances are commonly denoted by the use of a capitalized "Deaf," as in Deaf culture, Deaf community and Deaf identity.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the conceptual and ideological significance of the deaf/Deaf distinction, I only partly employ it here. I wish to avoid having to draw the line between those who embrace a familiar Deaf identity, those who don't, and those cultivating a less pronounced sense of being deaf. Put differently, I wish to suspend the binary classification. Ladd (2003) introduced the notion of "Deafhood" to underscore a Deaf sense of being and becoming, both within an individual and throughout a collective. As an analytical category of subjectivity, rather than labeling identities, it recognizes the significance of the deaf/Deaf distinction without having to establish an arbitrary boundary. Given the preliminary stages of emergent new subjectivities and affiliations among D/deaf Negev Bedouin, a sense of Deafhood can signify various degrees of such a sense of being, and it is particularly useful for imagining the range of shapes it may take.

Another issue at stake is the existence of several Negev-Bedouin communities where exceptionally high incidences of deafness occur, and where a locally evolved sign language is at the heart of a signing community shared by deaf and hearing members. Thus, they constitute a signing community but not a deaf community. Several cases comparable to the Bedouin shared signing communities have been documented in Martha's Vineyard (USA), Bali (Indonesia), and Thailand (see Groce 1985; Branson et al. 1996; Woodward 2003; Nonaka 2004). These cases are often examined merely as an absence (of a Deaf community), or in search of embryonic Deaf communities. Elsewhere, I examined one of the Bedouin shared signing communities<sup>2</sup> in great detail (Kisch 2000, 2004) and cited my reservations (Kisch, forthcoming) for the existing typologies which classify such unique cases as a kind of deaf community. I have argued that such shared signing communities may facilitate the integration of deaf people and reduce their disablement, but they may also pose unique challenges to the emergence of a distinct deaf alliance.

Until recently, deafness rarely served as a basis for social identity among the Negev Bedouin, nor was it a basis for social gatherings. The social networks of most adult deaf people, like their hearing peers, are largely derived from their kin relations, extended descent groups, and employment histories. This is particularly true for those deaf adults who grew up in communities where exceptionally high incidences of deafness occur, where despite numerous deaf people and the existence of a locally developed sign language, no distinct deaf community evolved.

Following developments in feminist theory, the awareness of the intersection of

gender with other social categories has emerged within different disciplines. The concept of intersectionality has been introduced to overcome the narrow concern with gender as a primary, rigid or universal category. Rather than categories, intersections are overlapping zones where social phenomena (such as oppression, stigma, or structural opportunities) are intensified or transformed through the joining or confrontation of diverse axes of identity and experience of social categories.

Gender, along with other social dimensions, has often been rendered irrelevant in studies of people with disabilities, disability presumably eclipsing the effect of other social dimensions (Asch & Fine 1988). In the literature on women and disabilities, mostly published from the 80's onwards, women with physical disabilities are typically conceptualized as subject to double discrimination (c.f. Deegan & Brooks 1985). "This 'double disability' ... structures the experience of disabled women and compounds the oppression of disability alone" (Oliver 1990:71). Indeed, disabled women are found to fare worse than both relevant comparison groups (non-disabled women and disabled men) in education, employment, economic security, and access to sexuality and intimacy (Asch & Fine 1988). Nonetheless, being woman and disabled may go beyond intensifying oppression, and may simultaneously transform the experience of gender and disability.

The editors of the recently edited volume, *Women and Deafness: Double Visions*, attempt to go beyond the additive kind of "doubling", and suggest such visions may also "multiply, overlap, and refract one another" (Brueggemann & Burch 2006:ix). Several articles in this volume focus on the ways "gender complicates traditional views of deafness and vice versa" (2006:4), and demonstrate how women negotiate the conservative gender roles that mark their education and participation in community affairs (see Robinson 2006; Lee 2006). Robinson (2006) reveals women's vital role in the (late 19th and early 20th century) American deaf community and institutions, at times when several deaf associations still denied admission to women and most had conservative male leadership. Women gained influence and recognition as social mediators and cultural promoters by creating auxiliary organizations and taking charge of community social activities.

Another study showed that communication barriers and restricted access to information have preserved traditional and conservative gender attitudes among the American deaf community (Becker & Jauregui 1985). A case that best demonstrates that the intersection of gender and deafness cannot be reduced to intensified oppression is that of gendered signs. In Ireland, two very different sign vocabularies emerged at the gender-segregated Catholic deaf schools, which dominated signed deaf education throughout the second half of the 19th century up until the mid-20th century (LeMaster 2003). Recently, Leeson and Grehan (2004) have demonstrated that Irish female signs continue to be used today, by younger women as well as their older counterparts, graduates of the Catholic girl's school. The focus of these studies is linguistic, and they provide little information on how other aspects of the experience of deafness may be gendered. It is also important to note that the literature on women and deafness, as with women and disability, examines mostly North American or European cases.

## Background: The Negev Bedouin And Deafness

The native Arab inhabitants of the Negev (*Arab Al-Naqab*) are former nomads commonly referred to as Bedouin. Nowadays, however, pastoral nomadism has

practically disappeared. Nearly half of the Negev-Bedouin population resides in semi-urban townships established by the state in its effort to settle the Bedouin in a way that would minimize the use of land resources. The remaining Bedouin settlements are formally unrecognized by the state and thus lack basic infrastructure (i.e. roads, water, electricity, and sewage). The Negev Bedouin<sup>3</sup> constitute 25% of the population of the Negev sub-district, and live separately from its Jewish inhabitants. Very few women are involved in wage labor and most men are enrolled in the lower strata of the Israeli labor market. Poverty rates and unemployment rates are among the highest in Israel.

During the last five decades, the Negev Bedouin have undergone drastic economic, social, and political upheavals following the establishment of the state of Israel, profoundly restructuring their social organization. Within contemporary Bedouin society, the socioeconomic gap is widening and there are considerable differences among Bedouin in education, lifestyle and gender segregation. As citizens of Israel, the Bedouin benefit from national health insurance and fall under the compulsory schooling law. However, neglect and discrimination have led to severely inadequate health, education and welfare services and facilities for most Bedouin, and fall short compared to those available for most of Israel's Jewish citizens. Further, the use of existing services remains subject to physical access obstacles and language barriers. While facilities catering to people with disabilities are inadequate for most of Israel's Arab population, the state of affairs in the Negev is particularly deficient (JDC 2006).

In Israel, deaf adults are not eligible for a disability allowance from the National Insurance Institute (comparable to social security benefits), based solely on their hearing impairment. However, some of the more isolated adult deaf women and a few men, mostly unschooled and unemployed, have been found eligible for such a disability benefit. Since 2002 all deaf adults are eligible for monthly communication benefits and a yearly communication-costs refund. Since 1981 children (up to the age of 18) with a severe hearing impairment have been eligible for a "Disabled Child Benefit."

The precise number of deaf people among the Negev Bedouin is unknown, and is estimated to exceed 500. While the expected rate of congenital deafness among Palestinians is 1.7 per 1000 (Shahin et al. 2002), the incidence among the Negev Bedouin can be estimated to be 3 per 1000. Consanguineous marriages (kin endogamy), the prevailing form of marriage among the Negev Bedouin, is accountable for most cases of congenital deafness. Accordingly, exceptionally high rates of deafness occur within certain descent groups, as opposed to others where congenital deafness has newly occurred and was unfamiliar until recently.

In one such community, the incidence amounts to 30 per 1000 (Kisch 2000, 2004), constituting one of the worldwide highest incidences of deafness documented so far. These high incidences account for significant differences in the experience of various deaf Bedouin people. Most significantly, deaf and hearing members of these communities have, for generations, accumulated a broad range of experiences with deafness. Consequently, a sign language has evolved and the extent to which deaf people are disabled or isolated varies considerably between different groups within the Negev-Bedouin society.

Two other broad distinctions can be made to generally characterize the deaf Bedouin population. A generational distinction can be made between Bedouin deaf people. Most of the deaf Bedouin women and men born before 1970, thus now in



their late 30s and above, did not attend school. Only in the mid-1980s did Bedouin deaf children start attending a deaf school in the district capital of Beersheba. Finally, gender conveys a distinction most evident in marriage patterns: the majority of deaf Bedouin women remain unmarried, while most adult deaf men are married. Those deaf women that did marry all (but one) grew up in communities where high incidences of deafness occur.

I have been studying deafness among the Negev Bedouin since 1995. Over the years I have conducted a number of community-based fieldwork blocks. I have resided with a family in one of the formally unrecognized Bedouin settlements for periods of 2-6 months each. In 2004-2005, I conducted multi-sited research during 16 months of fieldwork throughout the Negev. However, my primary host family remained among the Al-Sayyid.

## **Marriage: Unmarried Deaf Women, Deaf-Hearing And Deaf-Deaf Marriages**

The first Bedouin deaf-deaf marriage signified an important development in a process taking place among the younger generation of deaf Bedouin. However, as stated earlier, most deaf Bedouin men are married to hearing women, and the majority of deaf women remain unmarried. This section will first provide the context of the changing marriage regimes among Negev Bedouin. Second, it addresses the case of the Al-Sayyid descent group, where both deaf women and deaf men are commonly wed. Finally, the first deaf-deaf marriage will be addressed.

Several processes inform the current dynamics and constraints in the customary marriage regimes among the Negev Bedouin. Political and social change has, in many ways, restructured Bedouin society, rendering many of its previous tribal hierarchies and alliances irrelevant. However, in the realm of marriage these affinities remain of obvious significance, as evidenced by the high kin endogamy rates, estimated at nearly 60% (Weitzman 2003) of all marriages. Those marriages that are not within a descent group are also subject to strict regimes and hierarchies, according to which some groups consider other groups inappropriate for marriage.

When men marry women from another group, it is accepted and often even considered desirable. Metaphorically, it may be considered an act of domination. Accordingly, it is mostly undesirable to marry off women to unrelated groups. Besides men's interest to avoid marrying off their daughters and sisters in ways that might subject their group status to domination by other groups, marrying one's daughter to acquaintances is considered to be a manifestation of care for her well-being. Women also have their preference for kin endogamy; within her descent group or elsewhere where she has relatives, kin relations provide women with social resources. This network provides women with company and support that can be activated to apply pressure on her husband and family when necessary. Polygyny, common among the Negev Bedouin, can also facilitate keeping women wed within their descent group. It is rare for men to remain unmarried but not uncommon for women.

Unmarried women, though a small minority, do have their social roles. Nonetheless, women's sexuality is a key cultural metaphor and unless properly managed by marriage, is considered potentially disgraceful for women and their kinsmen. Therefore, divorced or widowed women (of reproductive age) will remain

under the "protection" of the household of one of her male kin (father, brother or son). Such unmarried women fully participate in other tasks considered to be part of women's gender roles: caring for the household, children and the elderly and participating in food production (to the extent that it is still household based). Like most Bedouin women, they are dependent on the male head of the household.

Sedentarization (permanent settling) and male proletarianization have been accompanied by a sharp decline in household production and Bedouin women's roles and status (Jakubowska 1988; Lewando-Hundt 1984). Consequently, motherhood has become even more significant for many Bedouin women. Therefore, while many young women aspire for a more intimate friendship from their partners and are increasingly apprehensive of polygyny, most women would compromise on their marriage partner for the sake of social stability and childbearing. Bedouin women are not expected to be interested in sex, or in men for that matter. However, childbearing and motherhood are essential constituents of their feminine subjectivities, only attainable through marriage.

Some drastic changes have taken place in recent decades. The average marriage age of men has increased far more significantly than that of women, and men are expected to raise more funds before marriage while commonly spending several years away from their homes working in other parts of the country. Thus, for many young men, other social networks have replaced the old ones. For them, descent-group solidarities have weakened and more men do not feel obligated to follow the marriages arranged for them. When accepted, such arrangements are more often unsuccessful. Consequently, finding a match for women is considered increasingly difficult and women are considered more vulnerable in marriages. Finding an appropriate — trusted, respectable, stable and preferably familiar — marriage partner is increasingly perceived to be difficult and profoundly uncertain.

This being said, let me return to the case of deaf Bedouin women. While they mostly remain unmarried, the Al-Sayyid descent group is exceptional in this respect. Until recently, all deaf Al-Sayyid women were wed, as were most of their hearing sisters, to one of their kinsmen. All deaf women are married to hearing husbands. However, these men were often previously familiar with sign language as well as with other deaf individuals within this shared signing community. The unique experience and knowledge of deafness that informs these marriages among the Al-Sayyid are not shared by the roughly hundred other Negev-Bedouin descent groups.

However, at least two other descent groups (both of the Qderat alliance) have comparable incidences of deafness as those occurring among the Al-Sayyid. There, too, a local sign language evolved, constituting shared signing communities that, in many ways, facilitates the integration of deaf people. Nonetheless, when it comes to marriage of deaf people, they resemble those descent groups where fewer deaf people were born; deaf men marry hearing partners and most deaf women remain unmarried. A comprehensive comparison between the histories of these shared signing communities can illuminate this striking difference (this however would be beyond the scope of this paper). Still, married or unmarried women among the Al-Sayyid or the Qderat cannot be considered socially isolated; they are surrounded by abundant deaf and hearing people who master sign language.

Among those descent groups where deafness only recently occurred, little attempt was made to find marriage partners for deaf women. Here, unlike among the Al-



Sayyid or Qderat, deafness often resulted in social marginality or isolation due to the absence of a pre-existing sign language, the lack of other deaf people and the consequent lack of experience of the hearing parents and other kin with deafness.

While being unmarried is less uncommon or socially deviant for women than for men, it remains that many deaf Bedouin women who remain unmarried, are deprived of fulfilling their role as mothers. This deprivation cannot be underestimated given the increasing significance of motherhood for Bedouin women's status. Deaf women are not considered unfit for women's roles as nurturers, mothers and wives, but in most families, the absence of a precedent and the increasing difficulty in finding marriage partners renders their marriages unattainable. Thus, while fears of remaining unmarried are not perceived to be unique for deaf women, the compromises accepted by their hearing peers are often unavailable for them. Deaf women, then, are more commonly forced to accept the role of childless unmarried daughters. Such a prospect should be considered as severe disablement for most deaf Bedouin women.

The ability to acquire women's traditional roles may not be regarded as the best measure of women's social success. Some of the literature on women with disabilities suggests that some women may not see marriage as a preferred status. Asch and Fine (1988:13) comment that in view of the exemption from traditional gender roles, women with disabilities might be "freer" to be nontraditional. However, as Asch and Fine note, themselves, non-disabled women are more likely to have the possibilities to choose between "traditional" and "nontraditional" lifestyles. Indeed, for most deaf (and hearing) Bedouin women any "nontraditional" alternative which excludes motherhood is regarded as a default rather than a preference.

Finally, the dramatic event of the first deaf-deaf marriage and the prospect of it becoming a more common marriage pattern among young deaf Bedouins should be considered. Unlike many other cases, where people perceived to be impaired are expected to marry their like, the idea of deaf-deaf marriages was unfamiliar to most Bedouin until recently and mostly considered to be technically impractical. Where deafness constitutes a distinct social identity, deaf-deaf marriages are the most common and preferred form of marriage, and a key pillar and manifestation of deaf communities (Padden & Humphries 1988; Schein 1989).

Unsurprisingly, the first young deaf Bedouin men who attempted to marry deaf partners all graduated from the residential school up north, where they have been increasingly exposed to deaf people affiliated with deaf communities, and thus acquired a sense of Deafhood. In the past two years, three deaf men have married deaf women. All three men grew up in communities where deafness had newly occurred; thus no existing expectations or solutions were available, possibly leaving more room for innovation. However, for these young men this was not a self-evident enterprise. While it is gradually more acceptable for men to find their own marriage partners, marriages remain formally arranged by family networks.

Nawwaf is one of the first deaf men to marry a deaf bride. Of his extended descent group (comprised of several thousand people), only two more deaf men were born, both of similar age and unmarried. His parents have invested in their children's education, including Nawwaf, who grew up to be a well-mannered, hard working and educated young man. At first, Nawwaf's father assured him they could find him the best of brides. "No one is too good for my son," his father said. "There are many good-looking, hearing young brides we can arrange for him."

At first irritated by his father's attitude, Nawwaf had gradually convinced his father and brothers: "I will not marry a woman who believes she is better than I am, and I need a bride who can understand me and communicate in my language," he repeatedly explained. Finally, he managed to get his father and uncle to join him in visits to several of his candidates' families. The first family declined the offer because Nawwaf's family was one they did not have previous marriage relations with and considered them to be of lesser descent. However, Nawwaf had several more candidates and finally his marriage was successfully arranged. Nawwaf's festive wedding became a major event attended by many of his deaf classmates from all over the Negev, as well as by some of his classmates and teachers from the residential school. The deaf staff members in particular proudly maintained their contribution to Nawwaf's deaf consciousness, and motivation to marry a deaf woman.

The two other deaf men, who married the same year, married non-Bedouin Arab women. Additionally, both of them married women considered by many deaf people to be hard-of-hearing, given their partial capacity to communicate in spoken Arabic. Both young men argued that their wife was better assimilated and schooled than any of the deaf women in the Negev and was therefore more capable of communicating with their family.

Nawwaf, however, was critical of their choice, and following his own marriage, became an active advocate of deaf-deaf marriages. He repeatedly encouraged his yet unmarried deaf friends to seek a local deaf bride. On one occasion, he even escorted a friend on a first attempt to visit the family of the preferred bride. As it turned out, this attempt was unsuccessful and the groom ended up marrying one of his hearing relatives. Soon afterwards, three of their peers were married, all with hearing brides.

The news of these marriages and marriage attempts travelled fast, the schools where deaf students gathered being the major sites of exchange. Speculations were made and rumors spread. Among the young deaf men, the issue has become a common topic for debates. Masculinity is informed by the act of domination to which gender relations are central. Thus, for Bedouin men to express their desire to marry, and moreover, to have selective preferences for marriage partners is well embedded in social norms and even essential for the enactment of their sense of masculine subjectivity.

For young Bedouin women, the range of possibilities to embody such desires is quite different. Young Bedouin deaf women's subjectivities are also gradually becoming informed by a sense of Deafhood. Nonetheless, manifesting such preferences (for instance, to marry a deaf man) is largely perceived as presenting additional obstacles and further reducing any prospects of marriage. Motherhood is a valid desire that can only legitimately be achieved through marriage; but existing social norms do not allow women to openly express their interest in men. Like their young hearing sisters, they refrain from showing enthusiasm with regard to marriage and regularly state they do not wish to marry at all. In more intimate gatherings though, young deaf women express their wish that such deaf-deaf marriages would become more common.

These first deaf-deaf marriages also caused tension, which further underlines the discrepancy between young deaf Bedouin men and women. The preference for deaf brides from the north suggested that the language sophistication of their Bedouin female peers was insufficient. Additionally, given the widening marriage-

age gap (between Bedouin women and men), many of the young women assume this innovation will not affect them but only the younger deaf women. One young deaf woman was suggesting, bitterly, that they might end up becoming the elder deaf men's second wives.

## Schooling: New Social Skills And Resources

The first deaf Bedouin students began attending school only in the 1980's. They were sent to the "Niv school", a special education school for the deaf in Beersheba. Most of the young deaf Bedouin (born between the 1970s and 1990s) discussed here spent several years in this school.

This school belonged to the Hebrew-Jewish education section,<sup>4</sup> and the language of instruction was signed Hebrew.<sup>5</sup> For those deaf Bedouin children and teenagers who did not have other deaf relatives, this school provided the first encounter with other deaf children of different ages, and the often belated but extremely significant opportunity for the acquisition and use of sign language. Over 90 percent of these children were born to hearing parents and had very limited access to sign language before entering the school system.

Those children from the Al-Sayyid and Qderat groups accounted for approximately one-third of the students. Already fluent in their locally developed sign language, the Niv School exposed them to Israeli Sign Language (ISL) and most of them became bilingual signers. To this day, the language spoken by most of the Niv graduates when communicating with one another is ISL.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding the importance of this school in bringing deaf Bedouin students together, hardly any of its graduates achieved full literacy in any language; to the extent they did, it was Hebrew literacy. Simultaneously, the Jewish deaf students were increasingly being mainstreamed, accessing a better level of education. Thus, the school was soon populated primarily by Bedouin students. The Niv school, belonging to the special education division, had a lowered educational level: the training provided was more vocational in nature and more subject to gender biases.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the school's staff (entirely Jewish and Hebrew speaking)<sup>8</sup> had little knowledge of their students' cultural and social backgrounds, and often applied ultra conservative gender stereotypes and cultural images of Bedouin society.

For the children from the Al-Sayyid and Qderat groups, deaf schooling separates them from their hearing (often signing) peers. Consequently, the youngest generations in these communities were less exposed to deaf peers and to the local sign language. Additionally, though they often reached the Niv School with the advantage of a fair level of language development, the failure to provide them with literacy further increased the gap between them and their hearing peers. Literacy is of great importance for deaf students, and illiteracy further limits their future employment and educational possibilities. Furthermore, literacy provides predominantly signing individuals with another language and mode of communication and access to mainstream society.

In the late 1990s, the Ministry of Education decided to gradually close the Niv deaf school in Beersheba. Some of the supervisors of the Jewish-Hebrew special education division had become displeased with the primarily Bedouin population of this school. The growing pressure from a group of Bedouin parents concerned with their deaf children's exclusively Hebrew and low level education, added to this

decision.

The new deaf Bedouin students were referred to the local Arab schools with the promise that appropriate facilities would be developed gradually. Subsequently, classes for deaf students were opened in primary schools in various Bedouin townships, and in 2005 the Niv School was finally closed. By 2005, over 200 hearing-impaired students attended local Arab schools. The staff of these new classes is Arabic-speaking and indeed more familiar with their students' general socio-cultural environment. Yet, so far, little specialized training has been introduced other than a basic course in ISL, the signs of which are now mainly used to codify spoken and written Arabic. Not a single one of the teachers was formally trained to be a deaf educator.

Within debates on deaf education, the choice between mainstreaming versus separate special education schools has been a prominent controversy.<sup>9</sup> In the case of deafness, the drawback of special education is not so much that segregation is seen as restrictive, but the consequent inferior standard of education. Most special education schools do not meet standard academic levels and therefore severely restrict their pupils' future opportunities.

The schooling available for hearing-impaired Bedouin students can be compared to both the schooling of their hearing Bedouin peers and that available to their hearing-impaired Jewish peers. In both cases, they fare worse. I do not suggest that the facilities available for Jewish deaf children are without room for improvement. However, most Jewish-Israeli deaf students are mainstreamed,<sup>10</sup> most of them acquire functional degrees of Hebrew literacy and basic lip-reading and articulation skills and growing numbers are eligible for matriculation certificates.

The educational infrastructures and achievements among the hearing Bedouin, rate lowest on the national scale (c.f. Swirski & Schurtz 2005). Though gradually more young hearing Bedouin, both women and men, attain high school diplomas and a small, yet significant, minority pursue university education, none of the young deaf graduates (men or women) have attained a matriculation certificate and only a handful have functional literacy skills (typically in Hebrew).

Thus, the state of deaf education for Negev Bedouin can, by itself, be described in terms of a double disadvantage, before even integrating gender as a variable. To fully comprehend the effect of the current state of deaf schooling for deaf Bedouin women, we need to address the impact of the residential school for the deaf attended by the present generation of young deaf men.

Deaf schools, and residential schools, in particular, have often been described by deaf people, members of deaf communities around the globe, and scholars of deaf history as the birth place of deaf culture and the site where many deaf people embraced and celebrated deafness as a social identity for the first time (see for example, Lane 1984; Padden & Humphries 1988; Senghas & Monaghan 2002; Ladd 2003; Lee 2006).

Since the early 1990s, more and more deaf teenage boys left Niv for Onim, a vocational residential school in central Israel (two hours north of Beersheba). This was the nearest high-school-level vocational school for the deaf available for students previously schooled in Niv. Since then, more than 40 young Bedouin men (now in their 20s and 30s) graduated from the Onim residential school, mostly with diplomas in cookery or welding. The school, with its established program for

hearing-impaired students, has enhanced the students' (Hebrew) literacy skills and provided them with comprehensive vocational training. Given the distance and required boarding, this enhanced schooling has not been considered an option for the young Bedouin female students.

The Onim school not only provided its students with occupational and literacy skills. For many of its Bedouin students, it is the site that introduced them to the notion of a Deaf community. There they met prominent Israeli deaf educators and learned of the current struggles of the Deaf community, such as the struggle for better TV sign translation and captioning. For many Bedouin students, meeting teenagers of their own age that were engaged with the deaf community also led them to visit the local Deaf clubs<sup>11</sup> and later seek out the Deaf club in Beersheba. Hence, the various schooling opportunities are a vital factor informing new identities and social networks. It is in this respect that the different opportunities available for deaf Bedouin women and men, intentionally and unintentionally, further the disparity between them.

What, then, are the schooling alternatives available for the deaf Bedouin girls? For many years, the teenage female students remained in Niv as their male peers left for Onim. Concurrently, their school curriculum became more crafts and household oriented as the girls grew older.

In the last years before shutting down, the Niv School extended its collaboration with the Beersheba vocational rehabilitation center. This government agency houses a sheltered workshop and provides vocational training and assistance, with work placement for physically and cognitively disabled people. The older Niv School girls attended a weekly work-training course which was unappreciated by many of the girls, given the simple manual tasks involved and the general disability setting. However, when Niv was about to close, it seemed unlikely that the older teenage Bedouin students, unable to write any Arabic, could be mainstreamed at a local Bedouin high school.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the vocational rehabilitation center initiated two courses of several months each to train deaf women. The girls were assigned to either a beautician-training course or to the course training them to become deaf preschool assistants. The significance of such training possibilities for these young women are twofold. First, it is a means to maintain contacts with their deaf schoolmates. Second, it might provide future work outside of their kin-based communities, possibly leading to relative economic independence and greater physical mobility.

The integration of deaf staff into the newly developing educational setting of deaf Bedouin students within Arabic schools is of great significance in itself, and presents another gender-related feature of deaf education. Four deaf Bedouin women have joined the Bedouin staff of deaf educators in recent years. Earlier, I mentioned Kifah, the pioneer deaf preschool teacher-assistant. Following her, three more young deaf Bedouin women were (with the mediation of their fathers) employed as preschool teacher-assistants at the more recently opened classes. However, now that Bedouin deaf education is mainstreamed in the Arabic education system, the deaf assistants' capability is being questioned, given their poor to non-existent Arabic language skills.

## **Discussion: New Vocations, Social Networks And Alliances**

Though an emerging sense of Deafhood is evident among young deaf Bedouin,

both marriage patterns and schooling opportunities shape it to vary along gender lines. In this section, I integrate these factors by discussing the differential social networks they produce and require.

As has been demonstrated, various schooling opportunities are a vital factor in perpetuating different gender tracking and life trajectories. Bedouin deaf men have more opportunities to participate in what are considered to be key establishments of existing deaf communities. The Onim School is one such establishment. Furthermore, increasingly more young Bedouin men regularly attend activities organized by the Deaf club in the district city of Beersheba.

Initially, they came mainly for the monthly gatherings of the signed news edition, special festivities and parties (often organized on Jewish holidays) and club football matches. Two Bedouin deaf men became members of the local club's soccer team. This club was established by Jewish-Israeli deaf women and men, and is linked to the national Association of the Deaf in Israel.<sup>13</sup> Though most Bedouin men felt welcomed at the club, the increasing numbers of Bedouin men attending the club gradually became a source of tension. Old members complained that most Bedouin men didn't bother to become members, and comments were made with regards to the fact "they never bring their deaf sisters along." Several Bedouin men considered negotiating separate gathering days for Bedouin (following the example of the growing Russian immigrants' deaf community members) but most Bedouin men were reluctant.

One of the first Bedouin members of the club, an early graduate of Onim, was assigned by the management to encourage the Bedouin young men to join as full members. However, many of them did not acknowledge the self-governing principle of the organization. Fakhri, a young man in his 30s, said to me: "This is my right as a deaf man to have information and facilities. Why do I need to join and pay membership fees?"

Some, following graduation from Onim, stay up north for a year or two, where they have friends and work. They, too, often visit Deaf clubs and associate with local deaf communities. When these men return to the Negev, they increasingly seek each other's company. They gather in their neighboring homes, and for some time, informal gatherings were regularly held in one of the cafes of the local market in Beersheba.

None of the Bedouin deaf women had ever visited a Deaf club. The young deaf Bedouin women, intrigued by the new ideas their deaf brothers brought home, could often not fully embrace these ideas themselves. Yet, their sense of being deaf resembles that of their male peers more than that of older deaf Bedouin women. The social network of the somewhat older, unschooled deaf women, and early graduates from the Niv School, is predominantly composed of their immediate kin group and residential compound.

The younger deaf women have spent more years in school and often consider their classmates their closest social network. Unlike their deaf brothers, their possibilities of maintaining these contacts after graduation are severely restricted. For Bedouin men, participating in social gatherings outside the kin network is a source of status and respect; for women, it is often perceived to be a hazard for improper encounters. However, education is increasingly viewed as a legitimate activity. It does not only offer women training and intellectual capital, but provides major means to negotiate physical mobility and a legitimate pretext to travel outside of the immediate kin-based neighborhood or village. This is true for the



younger deaf women as well.

In the spring before the final closure of the deaf school in Beersheba, several young deaf women were regularly gathering at the school grounds. They would mostly have a chat in the school yard and occasionally leave for short shopping excursions. They traveled on the school buses now intended for their younger siblings or neighbors. Many of these young graduates had simply informed their parents that they were invited to school for some educational activity.

These young women attempted to prolong and extend the physical mobility they were granted (to obtain an education), in order to maintain their school friendships. Attending the deaf school from a young age, they were in effect routed into having mainly deaf contacts. After graduation they are, like many of their hearing sisters, restricted to their kin community. Unlike their hearing sisters who have attended local schools, deaf girls know fewer boys and girls from their local age group. Thus, they have weaker social networks within their home communities, further curtailing their marriage prospects.

I return to Asch and Fine's (1988) suggestion to consider the denial of traditional gender roles as liberation. With regard to marriage, I have rejected this possibility, however, as the opening stories of Aziza and Kifah reveal, some deaf women do seek out what are considered to be "nontraditional" vocations. Some of the fathers of these young women insinuate, that in supporting such trajectories, they hope to provide their daughters with some future economic security, considering that they might not marry. In those communities where deafness has newly occurred, parents have difficulties in estimating their deaf daughters' marriageability. They are more often extremely protective and fear employment might further reduce their deaf daughters' chances of marrying.

It is therefore unsurprising that Kifah and Aziza, the first deaf Bedouin women to develop an employment career, grew up in those Qderat communities where deafness has been occurring for several generations, but (unlike among the Al-Sayyid) most deaf women, remained unmarried. The parents and relatives of such young women wholly recognize their competence, at the same time they are aware of the low marriage prospects of deaf women in their communities. Consequently, they are more likely to support them in an innovative trajectory. For these women, themselves, such a career is indeed considered "nontraditional," but they often secretly hope to utilize it to find a spouse in equally "nontraditional" ways.

Ahlaam, training to become a beautician, had confessed to her close friends that she is, indeed, not seriously interested in her training. She wishes to meet up with her deaf girlfriends, but most of all she wishes to marry and become a mother. In between classes, she has secretly been meeting an old classmate of her brother. This hearing, married young man has been sending her (SMS) love messages. Ahlaam's brother, deaf himself, and married to a hearing relative, regularly visits his old deaf classmates and from time to time attends activities at the Deaf club. Yet, he disapproves of his sister's wish to maintain such contacts. He claimed her training was useless and only caused him embarrassment and subjected her to a bad reputation. Like many other men, Ahlaam's brother believes his kinswomen's social contacts should be severely monitored and restricted. Some deaf men seem to be indifferent to the prospect of deaf alliance as long as their immediate contacts (primarily wives) will learn sign language; Ahlaam's brother seems to be mainly concerned with a male deaf alliance.

These developments among deaf Bedouin raise several challenging questions. Put most provokingly, one might ask if deaf alliance is possible without embracing deaf-deaf marriages. Evidence from various deaf communities around the world suggests that deaf-deaf marriages are vital to the emergence and strength of a deaf community. Considering the role of Deaf clubs and other joint social activities in introducing potential spouses, one might argue that no deaf alliance is sustainable without such institutions. In the study mentioned earlier, on the still gender-conservative American deaf community, most of the women that successfully gained influence and recognition were educated wives of deaf men. The primary purpose of the activities they organized in local clubs was social in character; providing, among others, a meeting place to find spouses (Robinson 2006).

Within contemporary Bedouin society, however, gender segregation is stricter and gender disparities in social resources greater. While there is no explicit rejection of the emerging deaf alliance, several impediments are evident. While gradually more young Bedouin women and men desire a deaf-deaf marriage, this notion does not enjoy the existence of customary avenues (such avenues do partially exist for deaf-hearing marriages). Marriages are still arranged for most Bedouin, and thus remain within traditional social networks. However, various social institutions and activities increasingly provide acceptable, albeit informal and discreet, sites for encounters between unmarried women and men. Primarily educational establishments, high schools and universities (and to a lesser extent, workplaces and political associations) constitute such informal sites for hearing Bedouin. Accordingly, I emphasized the implications of the gendered educational disparities. Not only are deaf Bedouin women deprived of better schooling and have fewer opportunities to develop alternative deaf identities and networks, but existing educational disparities keep adolescent deaf women separate from their deaf male peers.

Gender segregation and gender disparities, amplified by the marginal status of Negev Bedouin, jointly restrict deaf women's access to numerous vital resources. It is within these constraints that most deaf Bedouin women maneuver to negotiate their social positions and fulfill their desires. The enhanced access deaf men have to Deaf clubs and associations compared to deaf women cannot be merely explained by so-called Bedouin custom or women's restricted mobility in public space. Before deaf schooling was introduced among the Negev Bedouin, also deaf Bedouin men scarcely attended the local Deaf club in Beersheba.

As mentioned earlier, for many young Bedouin men, descent-group solidarities have weakened and new political, academic or work-related social networks have at least partially replaced the old ones. This general process inevitably also had an impact on deaf men previously embedded in their local kin-based communities. Thus, while these emerging manifestations of deaf cohesion cannot be attributed solely to the introduction of deaf schooling, I have attempted to convey the contribution of deaf schooling to the emergence of Deafhood and its differential impact on gender variant experiences and identities.

I have underscored both internal dynamics within Negev-Bedouin society as well as the effect of state-provided services. The marginal status of Bedouin society, and the traditional imagery attached to it, both contribute to the inclination to overlook the role of state agencies in fostering gender inequality. The essentialization of cultures and particularly their assumed discriminatory gender component (Abu-Lughod 2002) are increasingly evident when considering minority

groups and Islamic societies.

Where ethnic minorities are concerned, state agencies — staffed mainly by people belonging to the dominant ethnic group in society (in this case, Jewish Israelis) — have an even greater tendency to rely on stereotypes regarding traditional gender relations. Not only are most staff unfamiliar with the internal dynamic and diversity within such minority groups, they are often unmotivated to take an active role in supporting social change, either individually or institutionally. On the contrary, they often desire some clear working assumption about the social character of such distinct groups in order to provide so-called culturally sensitive services, or simply in order to deal with the unfamiliar. I do not wish to suggest there is no room for informed modification of service provisions. Yet, rather than questioning the relevance of advanced training for deaf women, it should be recognized that currently it is unlikely that deaf Bedouin women will attend a distant school requiring boarding. Though the geographical distance of the Onim School may not be intentional, it is a major obstacle presented by state agencies. Here, I have only addressed one factor introduced by state agencies in shaping the lives of deaf Bedouin women and men. Other vital factors concern issues such as the medicalization of deafness perpetuated by the introduction of cochlear implants and genetic intervention programs.

Structurally speaking, being Arab, deaf and woman in contemporary Israel manifestly constitutes a triple disadvantage. However, I did not pursue a comprehensive theory of triple marginality; the margins are often entangled with more than one or two overlapping power relations and mechanisms of exclusion. Looking only at structural constraints limits the ability to detect social dynamics and the ways being Bedouin, woman and deaf transform these experiences, rather than simply intensifying oppression. Additionally, such a triple marginality approach, though necessary to understand the political context and the restricted access to resources, may mask the local resources on which people draw to maneuver within their limited structures of opportunities. To do justice to the lived experience of Bedouin deaf women, their positions and structural constraints were examined from within the context of their own experience and the desires that inform their subjectivities and strategies.

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## Endnotes

1. The capitalized "Deaf" was introduced by Woodward in 1972, to mark cultural identity as distinct from the audiological condition of impaired hearing.

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2. I have presented the concept "shared signing community" in a forthcoming article, as a linguistic community where a particular sign language is shared by hearing and deaf people.

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3. The current Negev Bedouin population exceeds 160,000. This estimate is based on data from the last *Statistical Yearbook of the Negev Bedouin* (2004).

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4. Schooling in Israel is predominantly public, but segregated; the language of instruction for preschool, primary and high-school education is either Arabic or Hebrew. Arabic schools have a slightly different curriculum, and are under the supervision of a separate section in the Ministry of Education.

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5. Signed Hebrew is a signed variant of spoken language, that is, Hebrew accompanied or coded by signs (borrowed from ISL, Israeli Sign Language).

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6. Deaf schools and their student communities are often the site of the formation of new coherent sign languages (LeMaster 2003; Senghas et al. 2004; Pinna et al. 1993). However, the local Bedouin Al-Sayyid sign language and its Qderat dialects were not familiar to the majority of Bedouin students in Niv, and did not become the basis for the lingua franca of the students.

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7. This condition has been documented to be a common characteristic of deaf education (for example, Becker & Jauregui 1985; Lee 2006; Barnartt 2006)  
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8. For several years a single Arabic speaking teacher was employed part-time to introduce the students to the Arabic language.  
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9. Deaf schooling had been the subject of many struggles and controversies over the preferred settings and pedagogical approaches (Lane 1984; Van Cleve 1993; Branson & Miller 2002; Ladd 2003; Plaza Pust 2004). Rather than join in this debate, I am simply outlining the effect of the existing educational setting.  
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10. 75% of the deaf students in Israel study in regular classes (Weisel & Zandberg 2002).  
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11. Deaf clubs, along with deaf schools, are often referred to as the two constitutive sites of Deaf culture (Ladd 2003; Senghas & Monaghan 2002). Deaf clubs are found in most large cities and are run by deaf organizations housing a variety of social, cultural and political activities.  
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12. Several younger teenage girls (aged 13-14) were referred to classes opened in two of the Arab township's high schools.  
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13. "The Association of the Deaf in Israel was established in 1944 (before the establishment of the state of Israel) it is "a mutual-help association of the Deaf and for the Deaf.... for the purpose of advancing the welfare of Deaf individuals and the Deaf community, and promoting the rights and the culture of the Deaf in Israel." <http://www.deaf.org.il/2.html>  
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