

Women and Social Change in Jordanian Bedouin Society

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of laws implemented by the Jordanian government on the socioeconomic conditions of Bedouin women. Based on the premise that patriarchal “Bedouin law” creates a stagnant social position for Bedouin women, it discussed social issues such as health, education, and employment as well as NGOs currently at work in Bedouin communities in order to provide recommendations that would foster social change.

Key words: Bedouin; Women; Gender; Reform; Social change

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INTRODUCTION

The socioeconomic conditions of Bedouin women have always been at the forefront of topics of social change in Jordan. This is even more so the case given the political reform that has taken place in recent years. With a vast amount of literature coming to surface on issues that the Bedouin communities in general face as well as challenges that Bedouin women in particular are faced with, this study aimed at examining the socioeconomic conditions of the latter within the framework of the patriarchal “Bedouin law” as well as NGOs currently at work in creating social

change. Though statistical data was outdated and lacking in availability, this study used information gathered from the Department of Statistics as well as the United Nations Development Program to illustrate the population of Jordanian Bedouin women in terms of demographics in order to better assess their socioeconomic situation as well as the changes that they are currently undergoing as a result of current civic, political, and legal reform.

1. DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF BEDOUINS IN JORDAN

“Most of Jordan’s Bedouin live in the vast wasteland that extends east from the Desert Highway.[61] The eastern Bedouin are camel breeders and herders, while the western Bedouin herd sheep and goats. Some Bedouin in Jordan are seminomads, they adopt a nomadic existence during part of the year but return to their lands and homes in time to practice agriculture” (Bedouin, 2013).

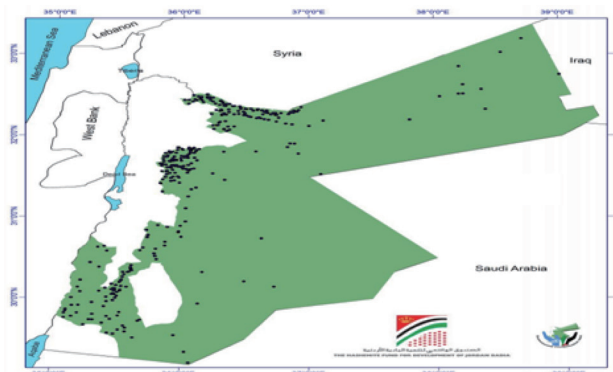


Figure 1
Jordanian Bedouin Demographic Distribution

**“Urban”, below, means populations of 5,000 or more, while “rural” consists of all areas between 700-1,100 meters above sea level that receive less than 200 mm of rainwater/year—80% of overall Jordanian territory. Jordan’s overall geographical territory is 89,318,000 square kilometers with an average of 68.8% people per 2 square kilometers. The total Jordanian population is

6,309,963—82.6% urban and 17.4% rural. Rural land is typically used by Bedouins for goat herding and farming (Housing and Population Statistics, 2004).

Table 1
Jordan's Bedouin Population According to Urban and Rural Estimates as of 2012

Governorate	Urban	Rural	Total
Amman (Capital)	2274900	144700	2419600
Balqa'	300700	117900	418600
Zarqa'	880200	50900	931100
Madaba	111500	44800	156300
Irbid	922400	189900	1112300
Mafrq	115200	178500	293700
Jerash	117500	70000	187500
Ajloun	109100	34600	143700
Karak	85300	158400	243700
Tafeela	62500	25000	87500
Ma'an	65200	53600	118800
Aqaba	117100	19100	136200
Total	5161600	1087400	6249000
%	82.6	17.4	100

2. POPULATION STATISTICS OF JORDANIAN BEDOUIN SOCIETY

Jordanian women comprise 48.5% of the total population. Northern Jordan, covering 26,435 square kilometers, is divided into three counties: the northeastern region, the northwestern region, and Ruwaishid. These counties consist of nine municipalities: Salhia, Sabha, Um Al-Jimal, Um Al-Qutain, Dair Al-Kahif (the Northeastern region), Sama Al-Sirhan, Husha, and Khaledia (the Northwestern region), and Ruwaishid. The total population of Northern Jordan is 146,250 (2/7 of the total country's population and 55% of all rural areas). Square kilometers per capita are greater than Central and Southern Jordan because it has more suitable environmental conditions and better road service in terms of proximity to larger cities.

Table 2
Population of Northern Region by Gender for 2012

County	Municipality	Population	Males	Females
Northwestern Region	Northwestern Region	24510	12803	11707
	Sama Al-Sirhan	17130	8985	8145
	Husha	14780	7442	7338
	Khaledia	21830	11206	10624
Northeastern Region	Salhia	17570	9143	8427
	Um Al-Jimal	16110	7823	8287
	Sabha	10280	5322	4958
	Um Al-Qutain	9140	4678	4462
	Dair Al-Kahif	7650	3908	3742
Ruwaishid	7250	3846	3404	
Total	146250	75156	71094	

Jordan's central region, covering 10,000 square kilometers, is divided into two counties: Muwaqar and

Jeeza. These counties consist of four municipalities: Jeeza, Muwaqar, Rujum Al-Shami, Um Al-Rasas. The total population is 74,660 (1/3 of Jordan's total population and 28.2% of all rural areas). In spite of its large territory, the central region has a small square kilometer per capita in comparison with other regions at 3.6%. Perhaps this is due to the prevalence of industrial manufacturing in the region, as the central region is known to have high labor productivity.

Table 3
Population of Central Region by Gender for 2012

County	Municipality	Population	Males	Females
Jeeza	Jeeza	36410	19333	17077
	Um Al-Rasas	7140	3712	3428
Muwaqar	Muwaqar	19320	9979	9341
	Rujum Al-Shami	11790	6199	5591
Total	74660	39223	35437	

Jordan's southern region, covering 38,000 square kilometers, is divided into four counties: Husainia, Quwaira, Hasa, and Qutrana. These counties consist of five municipalities: Husainia, Quwaira, Deesa, Hasa, and Qutrana. The total population is 44,360 (0.82% of Jordan's total population and 16.7% of all rural areas). The Southern region, unlike the North, has difficult environmental conditions and lacks proper road service and general infrastructure, leaving it with only 3 people per square kilometer.

Table 4
Population of Southern Region by Gender for 2012

County	Municipality	Population	Males	Females
Husainia	Husainia	9180	4789	4391
Quwaira	Quwaira	14270	7534	6736
	Deesa	4210	2317	1893
Hasa	Hasa	9320	4680	4640
Qutrana	Qutrana	7380	3781	3599
Total	44360	23101	21259	

3. FACTORS AFFECTING SOCIAL CHANGE

There are many factors that have led to a change in the Jordanian Bedouin woman's social position, the most important of which is settlement. Settlement united Bedouins into a solid political and economic force. Bedouins who united into one settlement developed closer ties than they had during the pre-settlement period. Settlement caused quick change in the Jordanian Bedouin woman's life in terms of her social role. For example, electricity and running water lessened the labor that she had originally performed. Educational institutions and

health facilities raised her level of health and education. She also became more aware of the world around her through media. “Unfortunately a swift and drastic change in the style of life brought with it many problems. It is accompanied with many different problems: a rise of poverty, crime, unemployment. But there is also a positive effect - Bedouins receive an access to the modern healthcare, education, and a very small and insignificant increase to the rights of Bedouin women” (*Bedouin*, 2013). Education is one of the most important factors that caused a change in the Jordanian Bedouin woman’s social role and social status. Greater school participation led, naturally, to increased education levels. This all led to greater social, economic, and political awareness for the Jordanian Bedouin woman.

All of these factors encouraged her increased participation in the public life. Economic participation outside of the house, rather than internal household work, became a new concern. She became more concerned with local and national issues as a result of increased interaction with NGOs. Settlement played a great role in increasing Bedouin concern with formal education because it raised their social, economic, and political status. All of this gave Bedouin girls access to university education and income that improved family income levels (Sarhan). All of these factors created a change in the stereotype of the Bedouin woman.

Labor is connected foundationally with education as one of the most important factors that led to a change in the Jordanian Bedouin woman’s social role. Labor helped the Bedouin woman self-actualize and exit the solitary confines of traditional Bedouin life by becoming more independent. All of this changed the common stereotype that the Bedouin woman is to remain at home and deal solely with internal household affairs such as raising children. She came to see work as a means by which she can secure her future for herself and her family against difficult circumstances. The development of media communications, especially wide use of the internet, caused great changes in Jordanian society as a whole and in Bedouin society, in particular. Via media outlets, Bedouin women became more aware of programs that dealt with ensuring women’s rights. Media, furthermore, raised her awareness of religious, cultural, health, and educational issues. Most importantly, media provided a forum for which Bedouin women could reach out in solidarity to other groups concerned with women’s rights.

4. SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF JORDANIAN BEDOUIN WOMEN

Two important aspects must be examined in terms of Jordanian Bedouin women’s education—educational opportunities and levels of educational allowance. The Jordanian Bedouin woman today possesses various educational qualifications as a result of the presence of

schools within close proximity to their homes. In addition, there are military schools as well as literacy institutions that aim specifically to improve Bedouin women’s social situation. In spite of a lack of secondary schools as well as their distance from Bedouin homes, some of the girls were able to overcome these challenges and attend college. Another challenge facing Bedouin education is the lack of teachers (especially female) willing to go teach in rural areas. The government, as a result, is providing economic incentive such as higher pay and housing provisions to encourage teachers to teach in rural Bedouin areas. “The Jordanian government provides the Bedouin with different services such as education, housing and health clinics. However, some Bedouins give it up and prefer their traditional nomadic lifestyle” (*Bedouin*, 2013). It appears that the highest education rates among Bedouin girls are in the Northern region in spite of the lack of income and lack of parent’s education, and they believe that education is security for Bedouin girls. Higher education in the North in comparison with Central and Southern Jordan is a result of the former’s being in closer proximity to city life.

4.1 Health

In order to better understand Jordanian Bedouin women’s health situation, we must examine the following aspects: 1) the relation between health awareness and place of residence, 2) Nongovernmental health organizations, 3) health insurance, 4) the effect of cultural traditions on health awareness, and 5) the relation between income and health levels. An observation in the rural areas is the presence of women’s health clinics. In the Northern region, there are 62, in the Central region, 46, and in the South, a mere 17 (MOH, 2012). In spite of a lack of specialized hospitals in rural areas, health awareness reflected positively on Jordanian Bedouin women’s health and on the family and children in general and on her ability to detect dangerous infectious diseases, use birth control, and ensure child vaccinations. The Southern region suffers the most in terms of health issues as a result of being distant from city hospitals and a lack of permanent doctors. Nonetheless, as a whole, mortality has decreased among women and children, as the Jordanian government has covered 90% of healthcare through government-instituted health programs (UNDP, 2012).

4.2 Social Participation

In general, Bedouin society views women with the same traditional understanding typical of gender roles in Jordan as a whole. Mary Kavar describes these roles as “restricted to those of child, adolescent, and then dependent wife and mother” (2000, p.4). Though Bedouin women perform more household work than Jordanian women of other groups, they are still seen by Bedouin men as secondary. The social status of Bedouin women is dependent on her age group and marital status; for example, married women have a higher status than unmarried women, the

status of women with children is higher than the status of those without, and those who have given birth to males is higher than those who have only given birth to females. When birth is given to a girl, the village does not celebrate as it would if birth were given to a boy, and she starts learning household chores at the age of puberty. She can also be married to a relative without any personal opinion or say in the matter. Men and women are segregated by gender except at the water springs, while goat herding, and farming. Ironically, when a Bedouin woman reaches an older age, she becomes immune to the Bedouin social dictates. This is the only freedom Bedouin women have with regard to overcoming gender segregation. The Bedouin woman is even more in charge than the Bedouin man of raising children. She is in charge of inculcating Bedouin tradition and teaching them their proper gender roles. Changes in Bedouin society in general have led to a renewed social role for the Bedouin woman; for example, Bedouin women are having more of a say in their decision to marry, or whom to marry. Divorce and polygamy are major issues among the Bedouin, especially common among the rich. One of the reasons for polygamy is the use of Jordanian Bedouin women as a substitute for hired workers. If a couple divorces, children stay with their father, traditionally. Court hearings take place before a tribal judge; those who attend court hearings are the woman's father, brother, or other close male relative.

4.3 Economic Participation

Unemployment in Bedouin society reaches around 40% in comparison with 14% in Jordan, overall. The majority of working Bedouin are males who favor work in the public sector and in the Army (DOS, 2013). Females make up the majority of unemployed at 26.8% while male unemployment sits at 11.3%. Bedouin women share economic labor with men in order to raise household income. Moreover, they do this oftentimes without income. The value of household labor makes up a high percentage of total family income. The Bedouin performs many various seasonal tasks, such as yoghurt making, wool weaving, sewing, cutting wood, and preparing water. The division of labor in Bedouin society is based on gender roles rather than biological differences.

In spite of its overburdening nature, her role gives her more of a say within the household. There is a small percentage of Bedouin women who work outside of the home- particularly in schools, health organizations, and NGOs, mostly in industrial cities within close proximity to Bedouin communities. The Jordanian government and NGOs have given Bedouin women small business loans to help in entrepreneurship (UNIFEM, 2013). Bedouin society, nonetheless, suffers from poverty in general because of its small and distant populations in relation

to the opportunity for creating industries and growing populations, a higher illiteracy rate at 32%, a lack of occupational trade schools, and a lack of awareness in how to challenge the 'culture of shame' inhibitors (DOS, 2013).

4.4 Political Participation

Bedouin Jordanian society in general is patriarchal, and control is in the hands of the man. He is seen as leader of the family and, sometimes, the tribe. Cultural traditions do not allow women to take a leadership role within the household. This 'Bedouin law' is the basis for forbidding Bedouin women from political participation. Her roles were limited to those concerned with the household until the Interim Voter's Law preserved her right to political participation which gives three parliamentary seats for every region. Nonetheless, qualified Bedouin women would face challenges in running for elections due to a lack of financial independence as well as patriarchal inhibitors.

CONCLUSION

Results clearly show a lack of NGOs that deal with Bedouin women's rights. There are few, however, including: The Hashemite Treasury for Rural Development, Research and Development Center for Jordanian Rural Areas, the Hashemite Fund for Development of Jordan Badia (HFDJP, 2013), the Jordan River Foundation, and the Jordan Badia Research and Development Program (JBRDP, 2013). The highest rate of unemployment in Jordan's rural Bedouin areas are among women, for reasons including cultural tradition's inhibiting of work outside of the home, a lack of/low pay, and lack of women's labor laws in terms of health insurance and protection from safety hazards; also, work sites are typically far away from Bedouin communities. In addition, there is a lack of trade schools to prepare and equip Bedouin women with the proper skills necessary for entering the workforce.

If we are to overcome these challenges on a macro level, we must first begin with the home, in challenging the patriarchal inhibitors that have led to such a precarious situation. NGOs need to be encouraged to work on development projects in Bedouin communities, in cooperation with the Jordanian government. The Government must do its part to ensure legal protection of Bedouin in terms of labor laws and health insurance. Correct statistical data also needs to be made available so that Bedouin women's situation can properly be assessed. Only by effectively working towards these progressive goals can Bedouin women overcome social stagnation in the face of modernity.

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